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GAMBIER'S ADVOCATE

RONALD MACDONALD

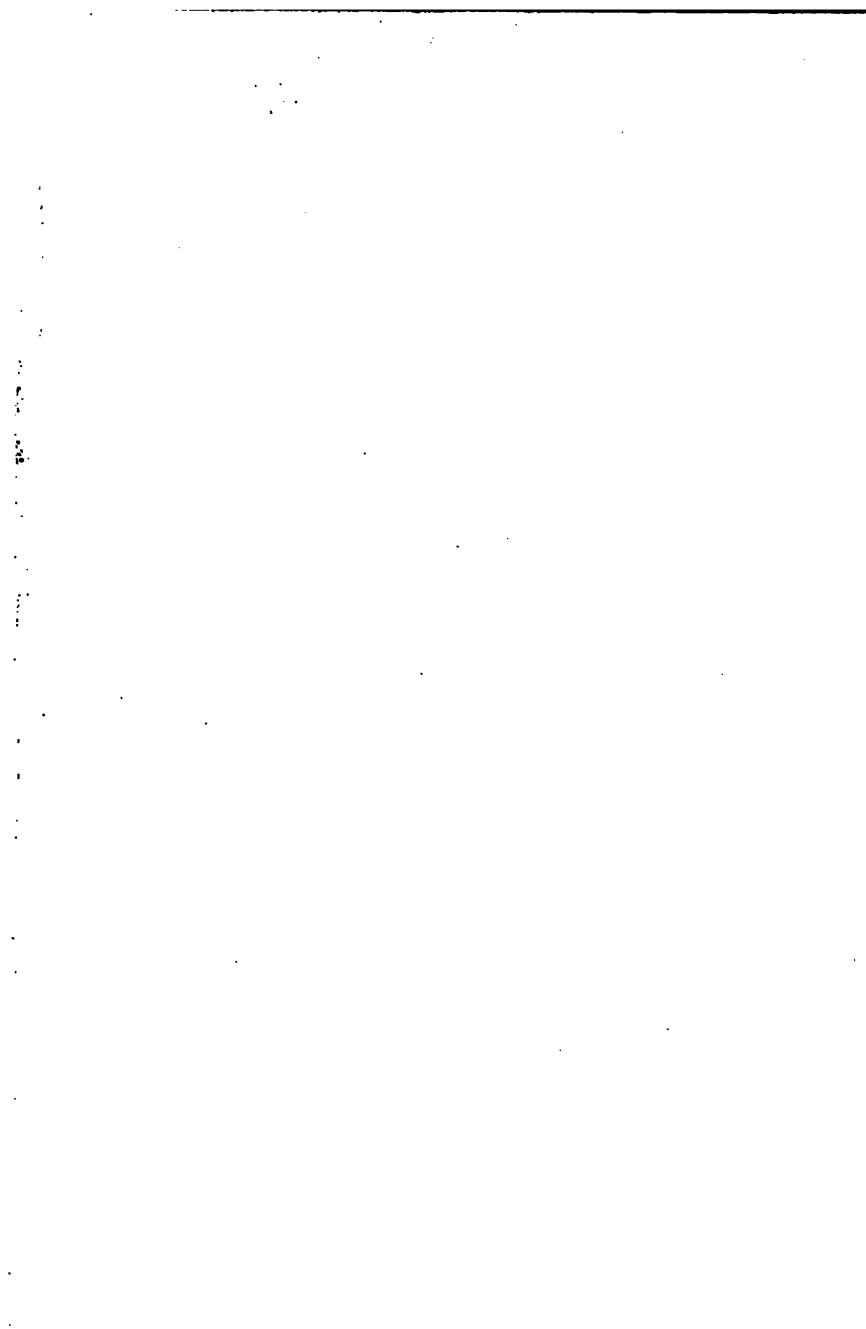


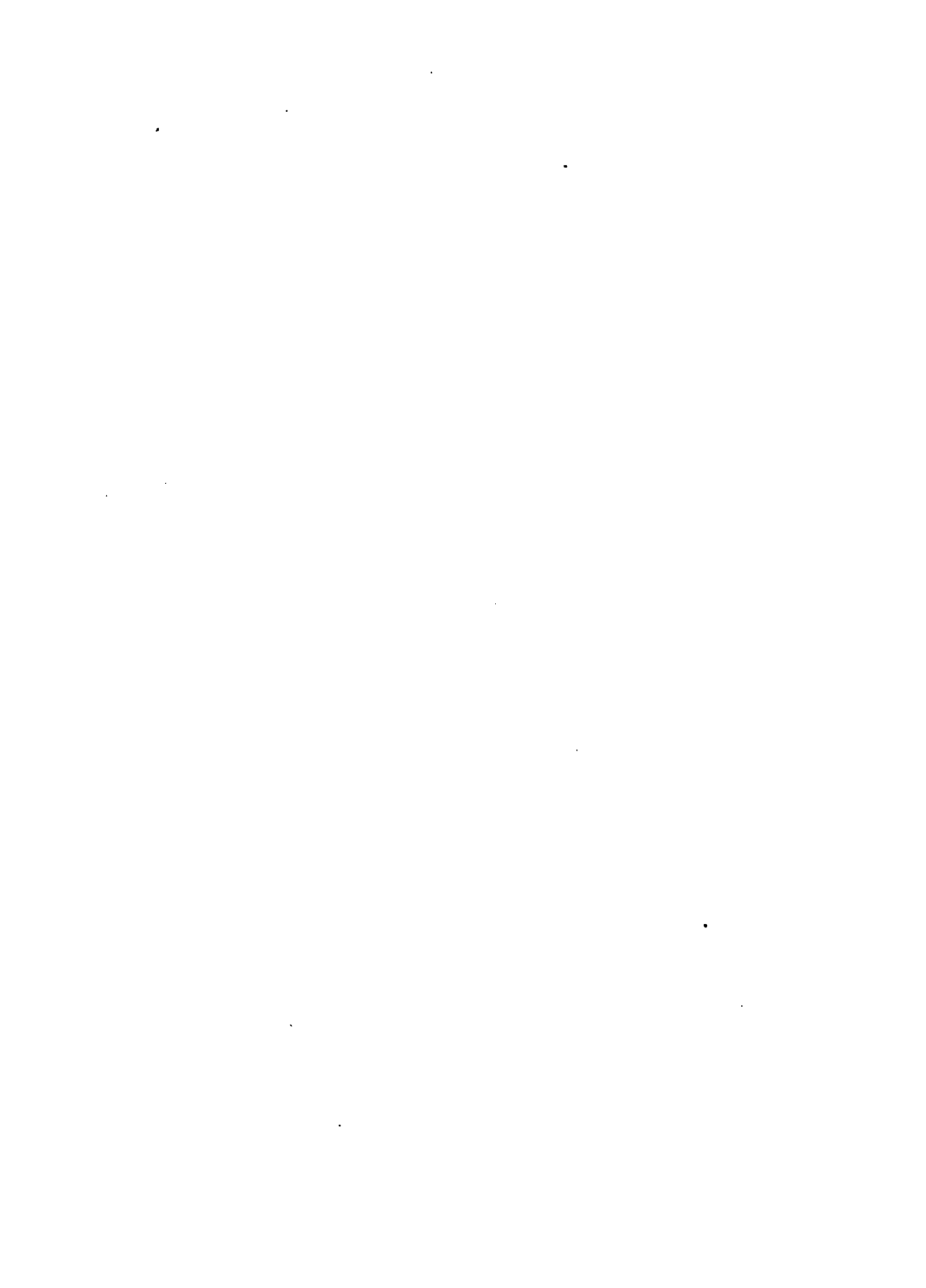


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GAMBIER'S ADVOCATE

By RONALD MACDONALD

LANCHESTER OF BRAZENOSE

"A story of fine texture
and engrossing charm."

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NEW YORK

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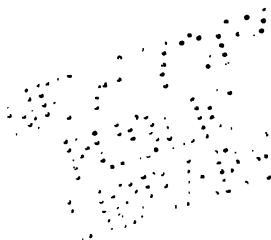
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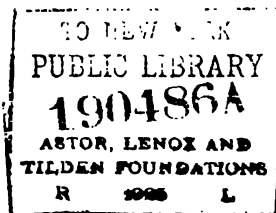
RONALD MACDONALD

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TRANSFER FROM C. Q. APR 1925

GAMBIER'S ADVOCATE

CHAPTER I

GATESIDE

THE ugly town of Gateside was in turmoil. It was noon of the day after a by-election, the poll had just been declared, and the jubilation of the uproar came from the partisans of the defeated candidate.

Two general elections and this by-election within twenty-one months had brought down the Enemy's historic majority of three thousand odd to an exiguous fifteen; and he who had but just missed being the Joshua of this grimy Jericho was a new man.

Stephen Gambier, Esquire, of the Inner Temple, with a large and growing practice which he owed to a little luck and a great deal of merit, was more pleased with the measure of his defeat than his mild and respectable opponent with the fact of his victory—a victory likely, between the policy of his leaders and his own mediocrity, to be his last. For Gambier, by glorious failure, had leapt to a place in his party. In Gateside itself, it was freely acknowledged, even by the Enemy, that the re-elected member, in spite of Dave Jordan's financial eccentricities and the disruptive schemes of his colleagues and masters, would, with a less brilliant opponent, have retained at least a respectable five hundred of his former majority.

So it was the defeated candidate they listened to; it was the defeated candidate they would have carried round their dirty town, if they could have got at him; it was the de-

feated candidate who told them triumphantly that he was not going to wait for another election to come to them again and tell them once more their duty to their country; "For in all the hours I have spent in talking to you," he said in conclusion, "I have never told you of what I or the party to which I belong would do for you in the day of power; I have told you only what we will do, not for a class, not for a section, not for a locality nor a sect, but for the whole nation — the whole Empire."

The cheers were of terrific volume and of good quality. But, as they ended with a clean stop indicating hope of more Gambier wisdom, there came a voice crying: "To hell with the Empire!"

Stephen Gambier lifted a hand which killed a shout of execration. His audience knew that his one mouth would punish worse than their five thousand.

"There have been men — even in Gateside," he continued, "who have been so ignorant of arithmetic and devoid of virtue as to believe that the State exists to nourish the citizen. But I know—we know that the days have been and are coming again when Englishmen will live as well as die for England."

Then, holding them while his voice changed from heroic to humorous,

"I could point out the person who uttered that graceful sentiment about the Empire," he added. "But I won't. In any case he will get there before the Union Jack."

As he turned from the balcony and stepped down into the big room behind it, he knew he had used almost the last of his strength. In spite of his elation in having polled three hundred votes more than his best expectation, he wished the day were over. But there was his host, Bargate, the great man of the outlying country; and even if he could find him now, there were excuses and apologies to be made before he could get off to the railway station. Then the long journey. And he felt very ill.

He could not, indeed, remember anything worthy to be called sickness in his life until six weeks ago, when, in

the last days of a big case, influenza had seized him. He had struggled through with success. But the penalty had been a fortnight in bed, and a condition of convalescence so much worse for his spirit than the period of high temperature, that George Jermyn, fifteen years his friend and now three weeks his doctor, had just persuaded him to go south, when the sitting member for Gateside accepted an office for which he was suited only by the security of his seat. He fobbed Jermyn off with a week at Bourne-mouth, where he bored himself as never in his life before. and then flung himself, body and mind, into the contest which to-morrow's *Telegraph* was sure to call epoch-making.

Now he was paying for it.

Luckily, Lord Bargate saw him at once; looked in his face, cut short the apologies, forced brandy upon him, found a car, sat beside him on the way to the station, sent a telegram to Jermyn, secured a compartment in the one-thirty-nine express, and, when he had him seated, stood in the doorway of the corridor compartment, looking doubtfully at the pale lips and half-closed eyes of the man who had nearly brought the big town of his beloved county back to the true faith.

"You ought not to go up alone," he said. "Better come back to Bardale and let Fanny nurse you."

Gambier shook his head, murmuring that his chambers and his own doctor were best for him.

While Bargate hesitated, wondering whether he ought not himself to travel to town, rather than let this new power in the party be endangered for lack of care, a woman came down the corridor, peering into each compartment. At sight of Gambier her face lighted up; but when she had taken the hand rather waveringly held out to her, and saw the pallor of the man's face, Lord Bargate saw the colour leave hers.

"You look horribly ill, Stephen," she said. "What is it?"

He smiled up at her, and said something of overwork, and of the influenza from which he had never fully re-

covered; and Bargate, vexed by conflict of duties, lifted his hat and asked the woman point-blank if she were travelling to London. When she told him that she was,

"I'm glad," he replied. "Mr. Gambier is not fit to go alone, and I cannot persuade him to come home with me. I am immensely relieved to know he is in good hands."

A porter came with her hand luggage. She made him arrange it in Gambier's compartment. Gambier murmured an introduction, and Lord Bargate hurried away to his car and lunch with his political guests.

At table, when he told them in what state he had left their man,

"What's her name?" asked somebody.

"Couldn't catch it," said Bargate. "She's about thirty-five and has a perfect figure. Handsome, too."

"It must be that Mrs. Lemesurier," said Lady Bargate. "She was sent down by some league or other—to work for us. Down in the Barside Ward, they say she was great. But I didn't know she and Mr. Gambier were even acquainted."

Had she been in the train, Lady Bargate would have called it friendship: for Mrs. Lemesurier, having dosed the future member for Gateside with very strong beef-tea from a thermos flask, having covered him with a rug and contrived a pillow for his head, very soon had him sleeping. More placid than mother or hospital-nurse, she read a novel throughout the three hours' run to town, glancing ever at the sleeping man without once losing her place by so much as a line of her page. She looked out of the window, however, as the train ran through Kentish Town station, and a minute later laid down her book with a sigh.

At St. Pancras,

"Well, Dr. Jermyn," said Mrs. Lemesurier, "it's a nice state you've let the poor man get into!"

They had him settled at last in Jermyn's car.

"When in doubt, blame the doctor," said Jermyn cheerfully. "Meantime, I'll patch him up and get him away out of this for a month or two."

He had just read the news from Gateside.

"It'll be better for him morally, too," he said. "They'd turn his head just now, if he stayed in town. Fifteen! My God, only fifteen — and Gateside!"

He would not let her go with his patient, but said good-bye to her gratefully through the window of a taxi, and had himself driven with Gambier to the chambers in King's Bench Walk.

For a week the patient saw none but his doctor and his professional nurse. At the beginning of the second week he was packed off in charge of a companion, half nurse and half valet, to the Riviera.

CHAPTER II

STEPHEN GAMBIER

THE splendid snatch at Gateside and his consequent physical collapse made the world talk of Stephen Gambier—or, rather, made the newspapers write so much of him that most men thought all were talking about him.

What they learned of him in the months of his convalescence and later, when fresh publicity came to him, was, however, so much less than is necessary to the proper understanding of the man's character and resulting history, that even a brief outline of his career previous to the Gateside by-election must, to be of use, go to sources of information more intimate than were accessible to the ephemeral press.

When he came to London to essay the great adventure of the Bar, Oxford had given him a First in Mods., but only a Second in Greats. A Second in the Law Schools did little to ease the wound to his self-esteem; but the Vinerian in the following year gave him comfort enough to last until Oxford seemed far behind.

Without the small property left by his father, he would have found the first four or five years in London very hard years indeed; nor was the patrimony large enough to make them altogether easy.

Yet Stephen was by no means unhappy in those days. He had no vices, a few friends, and a person which was always welcome in such limited society as London had so far opened to him.

In the fifth year he was briefed in a suit which he handled with that dexterous audacity for which he was soon to become famous. Winning for the plaintiff a case which her solicitors had regarded as worse than dubious, he had

secured also for himself their esteem and future support.

But the woman who had first driven her lawyers into a contest which they deprecated, and had then insisted upon their retaining the unknown Stephen Gambier to plead her cause against a powerful corporation, was not satisfied with the success which she had thus prepared for herself. The attorneys being more than pleased with the advocate she had forced upon them, Mrs. Lemesurier insisted only being paid in kind.

So Mrs. Hidges, wife of the senior and married partner in the firm of Hidges and Handling, found herself compelled to ask to dinner two people whom she did not know.

To the young barrister she made no objection; he was bound, she understood, to rise professionally and socially to heights whence Pembroke Square would be invisible. And, in regard to Mrs. Lemesurier, she was unable to find the objections which she wished to offer.

She made her call, therefore, hoping to get out of it, she said, at the price of her paste-board. But when she had done just that, she returned discontented; for she had neither made an acquaintance, nor learned anything to the discredit of her husband's client.

To dinner in Pembroke Square, nevertheless, Mrs. Lemesurier was invited, and to dinner she came—not a little to the surprise of Mrs. Hidges—surprise which did not survive the entrance of her young barrister. For something made her look in that moment at the face of the woman she had just met for the first time.

The company was small, and the table was round; advantages of which Mrs. Lemesurier was quick to make the most. For, without giving Stephen Gambier any feeling that he was neglected, she yet directed fewer of her words to him than to any other.

Soon, however, he began to feel that he was listening to some comedy of the latest model—for wit in the theatre was not yet out of fashion—while his hosts and fellow-guests were the performers.

Afterwards he remembered how quickly she had drawn one after another of the party within range of her humour and her charm. Afterwards, he saw why he had felt himself the one spectator and listener. He had felt it because the little play had been played for him—played so that none but the chief player understood the game. He remembered, too, how the points she had made, the laughter which had often marked the success of her wit, the clever twists of ambiguity which had turned the subject even while they gave her the surface triumph which is the only victory at such times worth having, had been underlined by a glance or a smile in his direction, with an occasional "Don't you agree with me?" or an "I wonder what Mr. Gambier thinks," as if she gave to his silence the presumption of wisdom.

But if Stephen thought that he alone had observed these things, he was counting without his hostess. Though drawn with the rest into the little whirlpool of Mrs. Lemesurier's gaiety and humour, Mrs. Hedges had not missed one of those glances thrown across the footlights. Something of what she had seen, and more of what she thought, she told her husband. But Hedges was not censorious.

"Gambier's a lucky man, if you're right, my dear," was all he found to say on the subject. "She's certainly a beautiful woman. She seems to me a clever woman. And there's no doubt at all that she's a rich woman."

None of these things could his wife deny; yet she thought ill of Mrs. Lemesurier.

Stephen Gambier had thought her well-bred, amusing, and good to look at. Of her means no thought had crossed his mind. And it did not strike him as a fault beyond pardon that she should have tried to make a good impression upon Stephen Gambier.

A week later, he called upon Mrs. Lemesurier at her hotel.

As he went, he asked himself why he was going. It is true the woman had asked him, but he had given no promise,

and was in most cases inclined to let offered friendship escape him.

Born of what its more self-conscious members would have modestly called a good family, he had in London found his friends chiefly among the professional men of the upper middle class. From a kind of *esprit de corps* which he never took the trouble to analyse, he had indeed made a point of meeting half-way the few of his own people who had memory and heart good enough to ask him occasionally to dinner. But of these ties the gradual relaxation was not altogether displeasing to a man who, in making his own way, was disposed to keep the privilege of finding his own friends.

According to standards of his own, he was fastidious in selection. And from this nicety arose, no doubt, the opinion that Stephen Gambier is and has always been a man hard to know.

When, therefore, he said to himself that he had come across St. James' Park to this hotel because and simply because Mrs. Lemesurier had asked him to come, he succeeded in deceiving himself no better than if he had been one of his own few friends.

His delight in her pleasant combination of wit and beauty, and her tacit homage to Stephen Gambier were not denied as part motive; but, shrinking from these as dangerous, he fell back with comfort on the thought that briefs had been frequent since his successful conduct of Mrs. Lemesurier's case. He had failed in a half-hearted endeavour to find out why Hidges and Handling had briefed him, and was not without a suspicion. absurd though it seemed, that he had their client to thank for her own case, and consequently for the cases which had followed. If so, could he do less than thank her?

High up, he was shown into a room whose golden twilight was made by the sun-blinds stretched over a balcony looking out upon the Park. It was late in May, and the scent of grass and trees came through the open windows.

Mrs. Lemesurier rose from the dimmest corner of the room.

"It's nice of you to come," she said. "I thought you'd forgotten your promise."

"I don't think I made any," he answered.

"Then it's all the nicer of you."

"I had to come, you see," said Gambier, "because I think I have some gratitude to express."

"To me?"

"Of course, it *may* be only to old Hidges. Briefs are just tumbling in since judgment was given in Lemesurier v. the Great Western Railway."

"Weren't there plenty before?"

Stephen shook his head, and the woman clapped her hands and laughed.

"Then my case," she cried, "is going to lead to a huge practice and make a great position for you?"

Her eyes sparkled in a face eager as a girl's. Stephen would have modified her expectation, but she interrupted him.

"All the same, you needn't waste thanks," she said, "on that stodgy old Hidges with the funny wife. I was in some court one day, and saw you. I'm rather fond of hearing trials. I know—it was the Harlowe divorce case. You seemed to be a sort of understudy to the fat K.C.—Congreve, isn't it?"

"I was one of his Juniors," replied Gambier; "the only one that never got a chance all through. So I don't quite see —"

"I saw, though," said Mrs. Lemesurier. "And it was what I saw, not anything I heard, that made me determined to have you for my little squabble. I took the liberty, there and then, of finding out your name. When the time came, I just insisted. However glad he *may* be now, Mr. Hidges was very cross then. So you see, Mr. Gambier," she added, glancing at him humorously, "your face was your fortune."

Stephen was annoyed. His face was too uncommon for him to have been left ignorant of its beauty. But his vanity

had been perverted into a form of modesty which resented as the worst of taste any reference to his personal appearance.

Mrs. Lemesurier saw the constriction of his forehead and lips, and laughed at him with frank mockery.

"You are either very young," she said, "or very insincere. Am I, perhaps, the first woman that has said you have a face worth looking at?"

"I shall be happy if you are the last," he said, with obvious, if polished ill-humour.

But Mrs. Lemesurier was quite unabashed. "Don't be cross," she said. "One would think I had made unfeeling allusion to some ghastly deformity."

So Gambier caught at his manners and made himself pleasant.

Busy though he was now become, he found time to repeat his call early in June. And he enjoyed the second so much more than the first visit, that, after it was over, he was struck by the curious fact that he, the reticent man, had told about himself all that was of interest, while she, the woman apparently frank and demonstrative, had allowed him to learn nothing except how pleasant a companion a woman can be.

For Stephen Gambier was in certain matters younger than his years; and a friend who could re-inforce ready tongue, witty brain and wide observation with the attraction of sex and the charm of beauty was to him as new as delightful.

He blamed himself for not having long ago learned more about her from Hidges.

For now he felt he knew her so much better than he knew the lawyer — so much better, he believed, than she and the lawyer knew each other — that it had become impossible to ask the lawyer what he was free, if unwilling, to ask the woman herself.

Soon he lost count of their meetings. Close together came half a day on the river, the Opera, Gold Vase Day at Ascot and a musical comedy. Through it all Mrs. Le-

mesurier's temper was serene and her spirit of enjoyment infectious. With her content, away from her untroubled by any anxiety of passion, he felt safe himself and assumed the safety of the woman.

Just before she left town, near the end of July, Gambier took some trouble for her about the house on Campden Hill, of which she at last bought the long lease. .

It was on the day when they inspected this house together that she told him of the cottage she owned on Dartmoor, and invited him — casually, he thought, and indefinitely — to visit her there in the vacation. As they walked over the old lawn, for London so well secluded, it struck him that Mrs. Lemesurier was paler than her habit, and ill at ease.

"I don't think I'm just the thing," she said in reply to his questions. "That is why I am leaving town rather sooner than — than I had intended."

His hand was on the latch of the narrow green door which, with the high brick wall heavily framing it, gave the house its little air of conventional seclusion. He turned and looked down on her with friendliness almost tender.

"I shall miss you awfully," he said.

"Will you?" she asked, not looking up.

"What do you take me for?" replied Gambier lightly. "I don't believe you have the least idea how much difference you have made to me."

"It has made a difference to me too," said Mrs. Lemesurier. "So perhaps I have."

She asked him to stop the first hansom they met, and did not ask him to share it.

Three days later she was gone, and Gambier certainly did miss her. But even then he did not know how different was the difference which their acquaintance had made in the life of each.

Some men, ready in scenting danger to their peace of mind, would have kept careful watch upon their symptoms during the first week of separation. If Stephen Gambier had been one of these, he would have known himself heart-

whole before its end. As he was, he did not even know he had been playing with fire.

But the woman knew, and made, moreover, a shrewd guess at the state of the man's mind. And the difference between what she knew and what she suspected was not softened by Dartmoor and solitude.

But she had courage, and, according to her theories, sound common sense; and was not given to scorning the slice for not being the loaf.

Just before the end of the sittings Gambier got a letter from her. He was surprised, as he read it, to remember how little so kind and handsome a person had been in his thoughts.

She asked him to come to her the next week-end, and to stay as long as Dartmoor would hold and duty permit him.

"There will be no large house-party to amuse you," she wrote in conclusion; "nothing, indeed, but a few horses, some glorious air and your very sincere friend,
"MIRIAM LEMESURIER."

This year he had a stack of invitations for the holidays; and seized upon the last, if only, as he told himself, to escape the others. At the cost of three late nights he finished the dregs of his work, and took the train recommended in the letter of invitation. He paid himself for his overwork by sleeping four out of the five and a half hours of his journey to Tavistock, and before seven o'clock found himself driving up a moorland road with his portmanteau behind, a shaggy pony in front, and a driver almost as shaggy and speechless beside him. The sun was low on his left and the clouds in the west reddening to the pomp of its bed-time. The air was of a quality he had almost forgotten; and the illimitable moor seemed to offer the universe for a playground to his cramped imagination.

Before the shaggy pony stopped, there was no London, and almost no past.

At the leafy porch of a little house whose windows began

already to gleam shyly like a child's eyes shining through tumbled hair, Gambier was met by an old man whose dress supposed him a butler. His delivery of a message from Mrs. Lemesurier suggested that only of necessity was he less silent than the shaggy driver of the pony. Dinner would be served in half an hour; Mrs. Lemesurier was dressing, and would meet Mr. Gambier in the drawing-room at eight o'clock.

He was shown up a narrow stair, delightfully low-treaded, to a wide, low-ceiled room whose floor had an agreeable undulation. With portmanteau, bath and clothes the butler showed himself a good valet, and Stephen was in the drawing-room before his hostess. In this pleasant place, neither over-furnished nor over-decorated, with windows opening on the last of the sunset, he waited some minutes, wondering at the perfect quiet of the house.

Then she came. Her dress was a soft grey gown whose simplicity of cut and lack of ornament seemed to subordinate everything to the beauty of the skin and the figure it served. And her face, he thought, had gathered new freshness from the moor.

Her welcome was full of simple pleasure and kindness. He felt himself so glad to be once more in her company that he forgot the silence of her house, and it was only when they were seated *en tête-à-tête* at dinner that it struck him with something of a shock, and thereafter with a thrill of which he was ashamed, that he had not interpreted simply enough her simple letter.

Mrs. Lemesurier had apparently no love of the hovering presence of servants, for the butler left the room after setting each course before them. In the second of his absences, she laughed impudently in Gambier's face.

"I'll tell him to stay," she said, "if you think I'm going to bite."

He laughed in response, and said he'd take his chance. But later the woman, knowing him, and divining the thought she could not find in his face, returned to the subject.

"You didn't read my invitation carefully enough," she said. "I told you I should be all alone. And now you're shocked."

Protesting that he was nothing of the sort, Gambier could not point out the ambiguity in her letter. And he lacked the courage to tell her that she, if anyone, must pay.

"If you're neither cross nor shocked, then, and if you won't drink any more wine, come into the other room," she said. "I'll play to you, and, when you've heard me, you'll never want to go away at all."

He heard, and wished to stay at least so long as he might go on hearing. Always since he could remember had he loved good music; but for many years he had heard little in the drawing-room but mechanical reproduction.

In a pause while she turned over the sheets on her rack, "You had a piano at the hotel," he said. "Why didn't you play there?"

"You didn't ask me," she answered.

"That's as disingenuous as ——"

Stephen checked himself, but she finished the sentence for him.

"As my letter?" she asked. "Perhaps it is."

"Then why did you never play to me before?" he asked again.

"I had to keep something," she murmured, rather indistinctly; and Gambier did not ask what she meant, but abandoned himself to music which he knew and loved, interpreted through a good instrument by clever reading and brilliant touch.

"You seem to know all the things I've loved longest," he said. "How?"

Mrs. Lemesurier laughed. "A man like you," she said, "loves a musical form or idea the better the longer he has known it. I've only been playing the things you must have heard when you were a boy. By degrees I shall educate you."

For nearly an hour she played to him. At first the paths of her wandering were familiar, but before she ceased he was in a strange country of new delights. Having thus prepared him for unquestioning reception, she ended with a fantasia so broodingly tender in the opening, so thrilled with passion in its advance and concluding in a passage of achievement so triumphant that its last notes left him strung to a pitch of emotional sensibility altogether transcending his experience.

The woman left the piano, pale of face, with her breath coming and going quickly. The man did not speak, but rose from his chair.

"Good night," she said, holding out her hand.

Gambier took it and held it, and, having found his voice, spoke at once against his judgment.

"That last thing?" he said. "It's wonderful. What is it?"

"I don't know," she answered.

"Who wrote it?"

"It isn't written," she replied.

"You'll play it once more — just once," he pleaded.

But she shook her head. "It has never been played before," she said. "And I don't think it'll ever be played again."

In the hall, while he lighted her candle,

"Funny little house, isn't it?" she said, rather unsteady of voice. "This tiny, squat hall, with the two staircases rushing down broadly into it — and only one room at the head of one, and three up the other!"

On the edge of something unwise he knew he had been; but that night he was too tired and too fearful to ask himself the precise nature of the folly.

He slept perfectly, and the next morning splendid day so invaded his room that he was too bold to believe any folly could come near him.

Bathed, shaved and very pleasantly dressed, he found it yet too early for breakfast. One of his windows reached the floor and opened on a wooden balcony. He was half

way through the most delicious cigarette of the day, staring out on the sunswept moorland, and breathing its air as if he were drinking the final panacea, when the scent and voice of a woman stirred him simultaneously. She was standing beside him, more beautiful, he thought, than last night, and yet older.

"Cigarettes before breakfast are wicked," was what she said.

"This one's the cream of cigarettes," he replied, throwing away what was left of it. "Tobacco improves all that's good, and softens everything that isn't."

"Please light another, then," said Mrs. Lemesurier.

"Why?"

"Either I'm good or I'm bad. In either case," she replied, "you'll think better of me while you smoke. That's logic, isn't it?"

"You might be betwixt and between—mixed," said Stephen.

"I believe I am," she answered. "This morning, for example, I'm *gooder* than I was last night. But I'm not half so nice to look at. Tobacco might make me naughtier and—and prettier."

"Now you're getting mixed," said Stephen.

"*Getting?*" cried Mrs. Lemesurier. "You said I *was*."

"Mixed in your reasoning. I didn't say a cigarette before breakfast could make anything naughtier."

"I meant nicer," said Mrs. Lemesurier. "Let's have breakfast and see what that does to things."

It was a good breakfast, and things profited.

When they were near its end,

"However did you get on that funny little balcony?" asked Gambier.

"Some amateur got building at this cottage once. I'm glad he did," said Mrs. Lemesurier, "or there wouldn't be room for you here now. He made such a mess of it that there had to be two stairs. I showed you last night. Then, having separated the two best rooms by the twoness of the stairs and a three-foot stone wall, he, or some-

body else, joined them with a silly little wooden balcony that's quite out of keeping with everything. I rather like the place, you know; it's so utterly unreasonable."

She asked how he would spend the day: would he walk, ride or drive?

Gambier said that first of all he wanted to hear again the wonderful music — the "thing" she had played last.

But Mrs. Lemesurier shook her head. "If it ever did come the same again," she said, "it'd be in the evening. Not now."

"Then we'll walk," he said; "walk all day. Take sandwiches and climb up all the Tors, and lose ourselves, and get home awfully late and horribly hungry. D'you like that?"

"I shall love it, Stephen," she answered. She had not intended using his Christian name; yet observed that he did not notice her doing so.

Stephen enjoyed his day thoroughly, with little memory and no forethought. Seldom had fortune given him so fitting a companion for his favourite exercise. From his first glance at her useful walking-skirt and her jolly little thick-soled boots, to the last luxuriously weary stride of the return home almost at sunset, did he enjoy himself. Never once had conversation been forced, never once too intimate for comfort. Best of all, never once had silence been felt oppressive.

Not until they had finished dinner did Stephen remember the music of the night before.

While she held a match to his cigar in the drawing-room, he asked for it.

Almost meekly, he thought, she sat down to the piano. Her colour, which, since the end of their first half-hour afoot, had been fresh and vivid as a girl's, turned again to the pallor of the early morning.

She played some time before she found her theme again. When it came, again it held him; and again in the second movement it was rising to emotion intolerable — unbearable because it must be endured without the will to bear.

But suddenly the music swerved from last night's version, so that it seemed that a tale altogether new was to be unfolded.

The passion, however, transcended the vehicle ; the music broke, and the woman turned the burning eyes of a white face on the man. Gambier took her in his arms, and the triumph of passion carried on the music for secret ears.

CHAPTER III

MIRIAM LEMESURIER

STUDIOUS habit, ambitious purpose and severe taste had combined to make Gambier's life hitherto almost ascetic; and this period of unrestrained companionship with a woman beautiful, cultivated, ardent and devoted took effect upon his character far deeper than generally results from a temporary union of passion. In the end it was to sadden the man as well as to soften and give breadth to his judgment; but in the beginning it awoke him to a sense of responsibility somewhat uneasy.

A woman had given, and he had taken; if, as judgment came, the suspicion arose that what he had to give was hardly payment in kind, this could but add to his protective devotion.

On the tenth day of his visit they were resting, miles from home, Gambier lying on the heather, his companion seated on a smooth stone. It was a day of soft clouds and still air; "a dove-coloured day" the woman had just called it.

There had been between them one of those long silences which she called *comfortable*; the man gazing at the woman, the woman looking out over the moor with a half smile of something more than content. He thought her face five years younger since he saw it in London. And the brooding peace of its expression brought fear on him, so that he broke the silence.

"Miriam," he said, "it's no good refusing. You'll just have to."

She turned to smile at him, but shook her head, repeating denial.

"But why — why?" he asked, irritated by her persistence.

"Stephen, dear," she said softly, "it's your respectability that's demanding marriage for me. You think, perhaps, that some wrong has been done me. But you are not desiring me for your wife. And I wouldn't be it, even if you were. I won't be anybody's wife — not even yours. And that ought to show you how I feel about marriage."

A change came over her face, and for a while she looked her age.

"I've been married. You know that. I've said little about it, because I hate the subject. I loathe marriage. It kills love. I can believe that a man and a woman, married for other reasons, might come to love each other. They might perhaps find a sort of happiness, since the love would be a surprise in relief of the hateful obligation. But marriage of lovers — why, it's a foregone conclusion, when you make a duty and a bargain of the freest, sweetest, most spontaneous and unselfish thing in the world."

There was a pause, as if she expected him to argue with her.

Presently she resumed:

"You want to know why I won't? There are some other reasons," she said, smiling with an unusual touch of melancholy. "But this is the best and strongest reason for you, Stephen. I have put myself so entirely into your power to think ill or well of, that I can only say I hope you'll believe me. I have never loved any other man than you. I certainly love you better than I love myself. How much more then must I protect you than even myself from that wicked bond?"

Still he would not argue with her; and yet, though she knew her own unreason, it hurt her that he would not. While he hesitated before speaking, he saw her brush a hand outward across each eye; but never knew that she was trying to chase away her first sane vision of matrimony.

"Tell me about your marriage, Miriam," he said. "And

the divorce. If you don't mind, I mean. I might understand you and your queer notions better, if I knew what you'd been through — knew it all, I mean, as it is to you."

"It's a beastly tale — degrading. Must I, Stephen?"

"I wish you would."

"I was twenty-one when Major Vincent Urquhart married me. He was in Jersey, recovering from a wound he'd got in India. They'd given him the Victoria Cross for something he did in one of the Hill campaigns. His admiration was extraordinarily flattering to a girl with a healthy body, a joyous disposition and an active mind, all withering in subjection to a widowed mother that loved any one of her medicine-bottles better than her daughter. One new frock a year, and a good deal of lawn-tennis paid for by perpetual quarrelling at home made the prospect of marrying a kind, grave and distinguished soldier, even though he was thirty-five, scarred and religious, seem like heaven. Perhaps it'd have been endurable if he'd been able to go on soldiering. But the doctors wouldn't let him, though he hoped for a long time. When even the hope was gone, it was hell."

"Did he ill-treat you?" asked Stephen.

"A drunken navvy with the worst kind of nails in his boots would have given at least some movement — some excitement to life. This religious Scottish gentleman, with the heroic record, and all the drawing-room chivalry for women that you would expect of his type, was the very worst tyrant, I suppose, that ever squeezed the joy and colour out of a woman's life. If he had any similar effect upon his regiment, I can understand why the Army doctors wouldn't let him go back to it. My dress, my reading, my religion, my laughter, my poor lawn-tennis, my friends, the way I did my hair, my going to bed and my getting up — Stephen, I can't give you an idea of the iron slavery it was.

"I was what they call a good girl when he married me. I lived with him for four years, and during the last two

I'd have run away with any man who'd asked me. But there weren't any men to speak of, and the few were too decent.

"In the beginning of the fourth year, the Army being now finally hopeless, the religion deepened and blackened till it was a spiritual fog over every minute of the day and most of the night."

"How did you escape?"

"In the middle of the fourth year my mother died. There was a little money—only a few hundred pounds. We had a terrible scene about it. I wanted to have it for my own to—to give me a sense of possible refuge. Of course the reasons I gave him were lies, and of course he took the money and invested it for me. I'd just as soon have had it thrown into the sea. But I found among her clothes a diamond ring that I managed to hide from him. He knew there was such a jewel, but I lied successfully this time, and managed to get a hundred pounds for it. Fifty I paid to a man to run away with me."

"Oh, my God!" said Stephen, disgusted. Miriam laughed.

"The elopement was another lie—the best I ever told, and the last, I think. I can't remember, either, that I ever lied before I was married.

"There was a rather nice, silly youth that had a commission in the Jersey militia. I was about two years older than he, and I'd known him as a little boy. One day I actually managed to go for a walk alone. Vincent was praying, and I slipped out, against orders. That hundred pounds, sewn melodrama fashion into my stays, gave me courage. I could feel them crackle. Well, I happened to meet the boy, and we walked together. I found he was unhappy—in debt—cards. If he couldn't get forty pounds soon, he'd be in Queer Street, he said. I promised him fifty, if he'd bolt with me. He was frightened at first, but I explained, and he consented. He had a holiday due, and started for London, his people thought, but put up at a hotel at Southampton. I joined him there, and we spent

twenty-four hours together, registering as Mr. and Mrs. Jones."

"The little beast!" exclaimed Stephen.

"He was useful," said Miriam calmly; "so I don't feel obliged to judge him. He always said the money was a loan, and two or three years ago he actually found me out and wanted to pay me twenty-five pounds on account."

She glanced at Gambier, and was pained by the expression of his face.

"Telling you, Stephen," she said gently, "has been easier than I thought. It has brought back the wonderful feeling it all gave me at the time: it was a huge lark, the only real adventure I'd ever had; the only amusement for four years; and liberty at the end of it. But now I see you've got to be told some more. Of course you can fill in for yourself that I'd left a note, saying I'd gone away for good; that I sent him another note from London, indicating what evidence he'd find in that hotel register. You can guess that he never learned who Mr. Jones was, and that he gave me my liberty—that was the really wonderful thing to me. It was done, I suppose, in a temporary aberration towards human pity; for a year after the absolute decree, poor Major Urquhart began to have qualms of conscience about the sacred indissolubility of the marriage tie. His own sin in divorcing me became more interesting even than mine in running away. He always found sins so interesting! So he spent two years in trying to make me marry him again. To keep clear of him, I had to hide myself under a new name. The lawyers get his letters now, but they don't send 'em on to me. But—about the running away—don't be shocked; it was really rather comic. You see, though I was ready to throw away my reputation for my freedom, I wanted to keep my self-respect."

She laughed nervously, watching his face.

"I was splendidly melodramatic in those days," she went on, "with my money stitched in my corset, my never-never letter of adieu, and the big service revolver I stole from Major Urquhart when I left him. But I meant it all."

Again she laughed.

"I was obliged to *seem* wicked at Southampton, you know. So we—we sat up together all night, and I fell asleep in a big chair. And that nice boy sat up straight and never closed an eye. And in the morning my head had gone all sideways and he tried to put a cushion under it, and saw that I'd got that lumpy pistol in my lap under the shawl—all loaded, too. He laughed so that he woke me up."

"Nice boy!" exclaimed Gambier.

"Well, he was," persisted Miriam. "Oh, of course you mean taking money from a woman. Well, he needed it, and I needed liberty. He's in the real army now, and doing very well, I believe. And I'm grateful to him."

Gambier said nothing, and she went on:

"So you see, Stephen, if I was a runaway and something of a liar in those days, I wasn't the other thing."

"That's all, I think," she added a moment later. "While the divorce was going on, Major Urquhart sent me my mother's money. Afterwards an aunt that was rich and had quarrelled with all of us, died and left me a lot. There had been no settlements when I was married; I tried to make Major Urquhart take half. But of course he wouldn't."

"So now you know why nothing on earth will ever make me spoil love with marriage, Stephen."

At last he began to argue with her. She watched his face rather than listened, but soon cut him short.

"It's not the least bit of good, dear," she said. "And of course it's unreasonable. And, equally of course, nothing will alter my view."

Though Gambier had it firmly in mind that the only way to do justice to Miriam Lemesurier and himself was to accomplish the union to which he had been urging her, he prudently dropped the subject for the time. And in the weeks that followed, before his return to town, every attempt to renew his attack was met with a jest or forestalled with a warning.

"I know just when it's coming, you dear, queer man," she would say. "And I tell you it's no good."

Or, again,

"We've only seven days more, Stephen. Don't spoil a minute of them, dear, unless you want me to sulk."

Another time:

"Stop. I grant it all: I'm wicked — hopelessly wicked. And it's you I'm wicked for. But two wicked acts are never equal to one good one; so I won't — that's flat."

For the rest of their time she charmed him, puzzled him, irritated him, baffled him, and repeatedly enmeshed him. And every time he felt the net, he was pleased with himself. For his fear, when he had one, was that duty rather than love should prompt his urgings to marriage. Yet he would not, perhaps, ever have recognised this fleeting but recurring apprehension for what it was, had he not felt that the woman herself had divined it.

It was over at last, this Dartmoor idyll. Her almost final words to him were:

"I love you, and I shan't change. But you're never to forget, Stephen, that I am what you please — a life or an episode. You're not obliged to love me at all, you see."

In town, he found plenty of work and keen pleasure in doing it. He wrote now and again interesting and affectionate letters to Mrs. Lemesurier, at first to Dartmoor, and later to Paris. From her he received fewer and much shorter letters, often mere acknowledgments, but sometimes vivid and characteristic.

A few days before the date fixed for her return to London, to occupy the new house on Campden Hill, she wrote him a longer:

"DEAR STEPHEN,— As you know, I am coming home. There is a good deal I want to say to you before I settle down, and I think perhaps it will be better written than spoken. I've been sending you horrid, scrappy little notes all these weeks, but I have been thinking a great deal about

you, and your charming letters have helped me to understand you even better than I did on Dartmoor.

"I have made up my mind that Dartmoor was an episode. It was my doing, and if there is blame or guilt, I take it. London is to be, if you will let it, the main story of our friendship.

"Frankly, Stephen dear, I feel no guilt, and the episode will always be to me like a jewel too beautiful for any eyes but mine. I shall keep it hidden.

"This is what has got to be — is going to be. So, as if you had already agreed, I condescend at once to give you my reasons.

"From the first time when I saw how the necessity of precaution or concealment irritated and distressed you, till that last time when you told me how you hated that the world should ever have the right, even if never the opportunity, to say you had deceived it, I have known how that splendid, quixotic honesty of yours was bound some day to spoil for you what — Oh, I can't express myself! I mean, you hate the clandestine, and the clandestine would very surely in the end — perhaps not a long end — kill your friendship as well as your love. I can hear you making of all this an argument once more for marriage. That I have answered with other reasons. I will not repeat them, because it is settled. So let me keep your friendship, Stephen, and keep it on my terms.

"I do not suppose you will quite understand it all. But I do, because I am at least six years older than you, and because, though I have only once been in love, you have never been in love at all.

"Do not answer this letter, but come and see me very soon. If you do not refer to the subject of it when we meet, I shall know you are both wise and good."

This letter threw the man at first into a furious condition of irritability. But the woman had timed it well, so that there were four days between him and the possibility of seeing her. Had she written from her house on Cam-

den Hill, he would have gone to her at once, hot with excitement, stirred by memory, and egged on by a curious sense, which he did not analyse till many days later, that his manhood would be in some way humiliated by acquiescence with her wish. But when the meeting came, it was decorous enough. They were alone in her drawing-room. Superbly gowned, with her best manner of the great lady, she received him with an affectionate warmth which somehow dissolved Gambier's already weakened intention of revolt.

With a movement which struck her knowledge of him as curiously sentimental, he lifted to his lips the hand she had given him; and, from that moment till a day ten months later, their more intimate relation was not once referred to by either. Then, as she had wished, it came naturally and simply. The deepening of her colour at the first word of this reference, Gambier, who learnt women more slowly than he knew, ascribed to a quickened pudicity. And it was he that said, on that occasion, the final words; words which set the seal on her sacrifice:

"It isn't only that you've helped me in thousands of ways, Miriam," he assured her, "with your insight, and that blessed common sense of yours; it isn't just the thousand things and one that you've made me understand better. It is most of all refuge from fools and worries and sordid squabbles that you give me—and the wider view of things."

"That's your doing," she answered softly. "You've made me interested in everything. I fancy, you know, that what you sometimes call my wisdom is only yours thrown back to you. One's own ideas from a new source are always such — such —"

"Such a prop to the vanity?" he asked. "That's nasty of you. But even if I was the — the tutor, you not only do me credit, but bring me heaps of new stuff of your own. Take politics, for instance: I don't know any man better up in what's going on, and none with such a *flair* for motive."

It was a friendship patent to the world and unimpeachable. The little circle of pleasant, with a few brilliant, people which Miriam Lemesurier had gathered round her came soon to accept what antedated its own existence. And if politics in the year which preceded the Gateside by-election had reduced the frequency of his visits, it had in no way decreased his desire to carry all his news and most of his difficulties to the friend that understood him best.

The Gateside election was in the early autumn, three years after what Miriam had called the episode; and Stephen Gambier regarded the alliance as unshakable.

But Miriam knew that, for all his gratitude, there was one thing he had not thanked her for. It was a service of which she was prophetically conscious: she knew that when the great thing came at last to his door, it would enter a mansion, not an inn.

CHAPTER IV

EUGENIA

MRS. SILAS BELTERVANE was still young enough, and far too pretty for her unwonted ill-temper to sit ungracefully. She was offended by her husband, and not without policy in letting her displeasure appear. She hoped that not only would he give up his intent of leaving her for a week or ten days alone in the big house high above Roque Brune, but also that the little quarrel might lead, not, indeed, to renewal of love, but to revival of its lighter and more frequent expression.

She had certainly not yet gone so far as to tell herself that her husband's love was dead; and she would have been angry beyond grace and prettiness had she believed that anyone dared to think so. But it was in her nature to ask the rhetorical question: "What's the good of a man loving you, if he doesn't keep on telling you so?"

Now Silas Beltervane had good command of his temper; a practised control which led many to suppose him incapable of violent anger. On this occasion his mildness had the effect of making his pretty wife think him careless both of her prettiness and her ill-humour.

"My dear Eugenia," he said, "can't you see how important it is?"

"All that about the silly pistol?" she asked. "I don't see what it matters—except that Mr. Hawkins is a pet of yours, and Mr. Hawkins invented it."

Still he was patient, and told her once more all that she remembered as well as a woman can remember what does not interest her.

"It is not, my dear Eugenia, that Mr. Hawkins has invented a pistol. He hasn't. But he has invented a won-

derfully ingenious and simple clip, applicable to the cartridges of repeating rifles and pistols. The weapon that I showed you is an ordinary Browning so-called automatic pistol, in whose mechanism a slight variation has been effected which enables the Hawkins' Clip to be used. Of the advantages of this clip there is no possible doubt. Now, Hawkins, who is an employee at the Stores ——"

"Army and Navy?" asked Eugenia impudently.

"With us, my dear, 'The Stores' means Beltervane's, I think," replied her husband.

Eugenia hated his "my dear." If she had told him once, she had told him a thousand times that those two little words together are an endearment which marks the sluggish or the mechanical stage of affection. So she grew more than ever determined to shut out any reasonableness there might be in his explanation. But her husband had never been known to end an explanation before it was finished.

"Hawkins," he resumed, "had every reason, before I left town, to believe that the Government would adopt his clip. In the new service rifle, of which we hear so much, this would necessitate a modification similar to that which I showed you in the pistol — simple in the original manufacture, but prohibitively expensive afterwards. Hawkins telegraphs to me that he has word privately from both Enfield and Birmingham that the rifle is to be put in hand almost at once, and that the essential feature as regards his clip is omitted from the specifications. Now, if Hawkins goes to the War Office, they'll only snub him, especially as he can't tell 'em how he gets his knowledge. So I'm going myself."

"Can you tell them that?"

"I shall go straight to Lord Dewsbury — which Mr. Hawkins can't do," replied Beltervane rather primly. "You will understand, Eugenia, that I am not asked how I know things, even by Secretaries of State. They are generally glad to listen, and just now anxious to show me courtesy."

"Why now in particular?" asked his wife, hiding curiosity under her mask of petulance.

"They know I've been a faithful party-man, but they guess why I wouldn't stand again at the last election. Dewsbury, apart from the intrinsic value of the advice I am going to give him, will be willing to do anything in reason, to counteract the disruptive effect that Dave Jordan's fantastic finance is producing on so many of us."

Finding him immovable, she relented so far as to take a seat beside him in the car which was to drive him to Mentone; but she kept her grievance.

The old palace, whose shell Silas Beltervane had skilfully used in making his luxurious modern villa, stood well behind and even higher than the little walled town of Roque Brune. The road, until the Cornice was reached, followed for the most part the course of an older mule-track, but was now, for all its narrowness, its stiff gradients and sudden turns, in that perfect condition to which roads in France can be brought where there is money to spend on them.

There was one bend, nevertheless, her fear of which Eugenia had never quite overcome: a place some four hundred yards from the house, where the road was a shelf skirting the end of a spur. Its outer edge, however, had been well raised, and her chauffeur's orders, on account of her nervousness, were always to take this turn at a pace even slower than necessary.

Some two hundred and fifty yards from the gate there was in the rock wall towering from the road-side a little stone-arched spring, whose cool water was almost hidden by large-fronded maiden-hair rooted in the unmortared masonry. This well was Eugenia's landmark for the application of the brakes, when speed had been used on leaving the house. This afternoon they slipped smoothly by it without slackening, and she clutched her husband's arm. Silas understood, and leaned forward to his driver. The man half turned to him a white face.

"Brake's gone," he said. "But I'll get her round."

The car gliding of its own weight at a speed every moment increasing, moved in almost perfect silence; and Eugenia heard what the man said. Terror invaded her with a dreadful vision of the car overturned in the rocky valley below them, and herself crushed beneath it. She did not move, however, nor cry out, until the chauffeur, to give his dangerous turning a wider bend, guided the car to the outer edge of the roadway, so that, sitting on the near side, she could look right down into the boulder-strewn depths of the gully.

Then she lost her head, stood up screaming, crept on her knees behind her husband, who was leaning over the chauffeur's shoulder, rose to her feet, and was on the point of throwing herself out in the direction of the rising cliff, when Silas Beltervane turned and caught her by the skirt.

Eugenia was thirty years of age, vigorous and frantic; Silas fifty-one, a light weight, and hesitating between the horror of the road and the terror of the turning; but as they swayed in the perilous struggle, he saw the figure of a man, standing near the cliff on the inner side of the way, watching their approach from a distance of some thirty yards down the road.

The man dropped his stick and spread his arms; it was as if he said: "Let go, and I'll catch her."

Eugenia got one foot on the edge of the car, and Silas, with precise judgment of pace, let go at the right moment.

"Jump!" he cried, and even pushed her.

She jumped; Silas saw the man brace himself and catch her with both arms round the body; saw him, on the tremendous impact, swing sideways, as if in hope to break it; and then they were down, a dusty bundle that rolled, struck the rocky wall, and lay still.

Now the rock hid them, and Silas, who had forgotten his own danger in his wife's, knew that the car had taken the bend in safety. A short, straight run, followed by an upward incline, brought them to a stand.

When Silas, running, reached the place of the fall, he

found Eugenia, dirty and dishevelled, but apparently unhurt, bending over the body of a man with a cut on his forehead and an arm disagreeably twisted.

The tears were running down her face, and when she heard her husband thanking God for her safety, she broke out at him.

"Oh, be quiet, Silas!" she cried. "How can you be so heartless? Look what I've done! I'm sure he's dead."

While he examined the man, Silas Beltervane kept peering with doubting curiosity into his face.

"It's the collar-bone, I think," he said, "and a bad blow, as well as the cut, on his head. I'm certain, Eugenia, that I've seen the man before."

The chauffeur, having gone on to a part of the road wide enough for turning his car, had hurried back in pursuit of his master, and now brought it to a stand beside him. Eugenia fetched from the tonneau a brandy-flask, and came back unscrewing it. Beltervane waved it aside.

"You ought to know better than that, Eugenia. It's concussion," he said. "Water."

He gave his soft grey hat to his chauffeur. "Fill it at the spring up there. Don't drive. We shall want the car here, and we daren't turn her downhill again."

While they waited,

"Eugenia," he said, "I believe it's Mr. Stephen Gambier."

He turned back the edge of the inside coat-pocket and read the tailor's label.

"Yes. I heard he was staying in Mentone. Surely you know," he went on, seeing how little the name impressed her, "how nearly he stole Gateside from us?"

"Us?" asked Eugenia.

"From the Party, I mean. You're going to have a very distinguished man for a patient, my child."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," she wailed. "He may die any minute."

"Not he," replied Silas, more cheerfully than he felt. "The breathing is better already."

The chauffeur shuffled down the road, careful of the water dribbling from the soft felt hat.

"Well done, Stokes," said Beltervane.

He poured the water in a slowly spreading stream over the face and head of the unconscious Gambier.

As they lifted the helpless man into the car, Stokes thought of what he called the old-fashioned story-books, where they always carried water to the wounded man or fainting maiden in their caps or helmets; Eugenia thought of a man dying because she had been a coward; and her husband, good and kindly fellow though he was, thought of the name inside the pocket, which told him that his pretty wife had been saved from injury, if not death, by the rising legal politician of the day.

By the time they had got Gambier to bed in the pleasantest guest-chamber of the first floor, Stokes was at the door with another car.

Silas, with a dry hat as soft and grey as the wet one, spoke to Eugenia before starting once more on his journey.

"I've telephoned, but Ambrose wasn't at home. They'll keep him till I come. I shall find out Mr. Gambier's hotel. If he has a servant there, I shall send him up with Ambrose or the next best English doctor I can get. I shall stay at the *Ambassadeurs* for the night, and telephone to you first thing in the morning. If the news is good, I shall take the *rapide*, and be just able to keep my appointment with Dewsbury."

Eugenia was shocked: the one thing in the world to her at the moment was the pale, unconscious face of Stephen Gambier.

"About that silly pistol?" she asked, almost sneering.

"The matter is neither silly, nor about a pistol, as I have explained to you already," replied Silas. "If our guest, to whom I am profoundly indebted, should be in danger, I should feel obliged, even at the expense of my patriotism, Eugenia, to stay here. But if Ambrose is satisfied, I must go."

She had snapped at him when he thanked his Maker for her safety; now she was hurt that he seemed, except in a cold reference to his gratitude, to have forgotten her peril.

"But why stay the night in Mentone?" she asked.

"By travelling ten hours later than I had intended," he answered, "I deprive myself of a night's rest before a very important interview. It is the more necessary, my dear, that I should sleep well before my journey begins, if I am to do any good."

After they had bidden each other good-bye, he leant out to her with a smile, adding a last word.

"If I go," he said, "I will see that Clarissa comes out to keep you company — as fast as she can travel."

Upon which she smiled back at him more genially than at any time since she had heard of his intention to leave her.

After sundown came Dr. Ambrose and Gambier's servant. The patient was still unconscious.

They were about to overhaul the patient, when Eugenia made her appeal to be of service.

"You see, Dr. Ambrose," she said, "he — he saved my life. I'm one half of a good nurse, I do believe — because I can do what I'm told."

"His man's a trained nurse, it seems," said the doctor. "But I'll certainly call on you, if we need help."

She was politely turned out of the room where she felt she ought, by every canon of romance, to reign.

She put off her dinner-hour to get Ambrose for company, and succeeded.

He ate a good dinner, and talked. Yes — he knew Mr. Stephen Gambier. He had come out to the Riviera much run down, after his wonderful election campaign at Gate-side. "Dr. Jermyn wrote asking me to look after him for a month or so. Very able man, Jermyn — distinguished in spite of his refusal to spend six hundred a year on the Harley Street *cachet*. Lives somewhere near the Strand, doctors anybody, and makes his money out of the Ameri-

cans in the Savoy and the Cecil. They ask him if he's a 'specialist' in everything where the profession recognises no special practice — and they find he is. He's Mr. Gambier's physician, and his friend, I gathered."

"She pressed for his opinion of the patient.

"Well, it ought to be all right, Mrs. Beltervane," he replied. "The collar-bone's nothing in itself — a little pain and lots of worry in dressing and undressing — helpless on the right side, you see. But the other thing —"

Dr. Ambrose hesitated.

"You mean the cut on his head?" asked Eugenia, turning white.

"The cut's a trifle. It's the blow — the shock. Tell me exactly what happened."

As well as her memory of those terrific moments served, she told him.

"It's a wonder you weren't both killed," said Ambrose, when she had done. "Mr. Gambier must have tackled magnificently. No, I don't believe it has done much harm to his head, but he's recovering from overwork and the after effects of influenza. So we've got to be doubly careful. He'll come to himself, most likely, during the night, or early in the morning. I won't leave him, if I can help it, till he does. If he hadn't been below par to begin with, we'd have had him out of bed in two or three days. But we won't. The bandages would worry him worse than the broken bone, and he'd have headaches, most likely. All that'd put him back. So be prepared, Mrs. Beltervane, to nurse the man for a week or so — if you want him to go down the hill as sound as he came up it."

Dr. Ambrose, like many of the half expatriated, was fond of talking; so it was some time before Eugenia discovered how little he had to tell.

Before bidding him good night, she told him she had arranged continuous domestic attendance on the sick-room.

"So, if he should recover consciousness during the night, doctor," she said in conclusion, "you'll let me know, won't you?"

Her head was full of her adventure. If she shut her eyes, she saw nothing but the white, unconscious face that she had seen lying in the road, when she picked herself up after her fall. A beautiful face, she thought, and, oh! how dreadful if the man should die merely because Eugenia Beltervane had been a cowardly fool.

At four in the morning her sleepy maid crept to Eugenia's bedside and reported that Mr. Gambier had opened his eyes, recognised and spoken to his servant, and was now in a natural sleep.

Eugenia held back the tears of joy till she was again left alone, and then fell asleep before they had ceased flowing.

CHAPTER V

THE STEPMOTHER

SILAS BELTERVANE was born to a small business which he had made immense. To a clear head which had by industry developed the faculty for affairs almost to its highest power; to imagination, shallow but keen, which perhaps of all his qualities had most to do with his enormous financial success; to a mild and generous disposition, was joined a temper on certain kind of provocation so explosive that it had driven him in very early life by sheer terror of consequences to a systematic self-control, which had hardened with the years until the tradition of his ungovernable outbursts had almost died out even in those branches of his business with which he still personally concerned himself.

He was twenty-eight years of age when his daughter was born, and the mother died three years later. About his second marriage there hung for him always a flavour of romance, and Eugenia herself had taken pleasure in regarding it in the same light.

Her father was for many years in Silas Beltervane's employment — a man who, highly paid though he was, yet served the firm better than himself. To this William Davenport's skill as a connoisseur, traveller and buyer it owed its repute as the best house in the world for Oriental and Levantine goods of every kind. He had married a Spanish woman who died young, leaving him Eugenia. Her he took early from school, to carry about on his travels. Thus, if the girl had little instruction, she picked up under her father, a man of considerable cultivation, a knowledge of languages and manners, which, however irregular, she

could never have achieved in the surroundings proper to a commercial traveller's daughter.

Davenport died almost penniless, having spent up to the hilt of his income. The firm, which at the time was Silas Beltervane alone, was grieved. Silas had valued Davenport, and shown him friendship as to an equal. All he could do for the girl at the moment was to find her a place behind one of the Beltervane counters. Anxious to do better for her, so soon as just occasion should arise, he avoided personal contact with the young woman he had never met in her father's lifetime.

To Eugenia the idea of employment in a shop was disgusting; but take it she must. Reluctant and rebellious, she yet brought herself to the intent of doing her best. But she had no more business education than scholastic. She could, it is true, speak French, Spanish and a sort of Italian, as well as very pretty English. But of no tongue had she grammatical or literary knowledge. She knew she could not teach, and when asked why she could not, she gave the very sufficient reason that she had never been taught.

So into the Sloane Street branch of Beltervane's Stores she went; where, after much unsatisfactory endeavour on the girl's part, and bitterness on that of superiors who would have "sacked" her once a week but for the unspoken wishes of the man they knew for the best employer in London, she drifted at last into the mantle department. Here her figure and grace of carriage made her useful in persuading middle-aged women that they too could look as Eugenia Davenport looked, did they but wear such clothes as Eugenia displayed for them.

Somehow or other she held on for three years; until the day, that is, when she "insulted"—that was the official word—insulted Lady Bideford. And even then it was felt that Silas must be consulted before sentence was pronounced.

Mr. Silas Beltervane was informed. And somehow it got about in the *salon* and the fitting-rooms of the Sloane Street Beltervane's that Miss Davenport had been sent for

by "Old Symphony" himself. That meant a journey to Wigmore Street.

Now several saw the girl's face turn to a ghastly yellow with fright (Mrs. Silas Beltervane is a famous brunette) on receipt of this command. Yet the one who contrived to see her take a taxi for a journey so easily accomplished by omnibus, neither blamed her for the extravagance nor gave it the true motive. The poor girl was so deadly sick of fear that she "cabbéd it," with only two shillings and fourpence-halfpenny in her pocket, from simple inability to walk a dozen yards. But the kindly spy said Miss Davenport knew her way about, and wasn't going to waste her freshness in "bussing and trapsing." One way or another, Eugenia Davenport would score, and "you mark my words."

Some six weeks later it was known that Eugenia Davenport had scored heavily; and the spy claimed, very naturally, the gift of prophecy.

That morning, when at last she appeared before the neat little man whose nickname in his shops was "Old Symphony," because he always dressed himself in soft grey, with white gaiters tenderly embracing his patent-leather shoes, she had so far regained control of herself that Beltervane thought her sulky rather than frightened.

Sullen? Yes — but wonderfully good to look at; even the sullenness had its beauty and attraction for him. He spoke as he had purposed — kindly.

"Don't be frightened, Miss Davenport," he said, not thinking her at all afraid.

At the gentle tone she flashed, mouth and eyes, into a smile — doubting a little, yet merry and friendly.

"But I am," she said.

"They tell me you have been insubordinate, and — er — well, insulting to Mrs. Waring," said Silas.

Eugenia's eyes expressed vast astonishment.

"I cannot understand, Mr. Beltervane," she expostulated, "how Mrs. Waring or anybody could imagine it was she I meant to hurt. She's a duck. Of course I

know I ought not to have spoken at all. But it was just because she's—she's such a good sort, that I did speak. I was very rude," admitted Eugenia—"very rude indeed to Lady Bideford. She was insufferable—the fat old horror—just beastly to Mrs. Waring, all because——"

She stopped suddenly; but her colour had come back.

"Because——?" asked her employer.

"Because I'm a better mannequin than she is. When she got nasty I couldn't stand it, and said something—I forget what. But I don't see why Mrs. Waring should be hurt. I was sticking up for her."

"It is Beltervane's that is hurt," said Beltervane; "and Mrs. Waring with it, unless——"

"Unless I go? Oh, of course I know you'll have to send me away."

"I haven't made up my mind."

"But you must," insisted Eugenia.

"What if Mrs. Waring were to ask Lady Bideford to accept your apology?" suggested Silas, more because he wanted to test the girl than from any belief in the remedy.

"She wouldn't take it, and I wouldn't make it," replied Eugenia. Something had banished her fear, and she actually laughed. "She's a bad, vulgar, cruel old woman."

"We are not responsible for our customer's characters, Miss Davenport," he replied sternly. "But we are for our young ladies' tempers."

"Oh, but I know I've got to go, Mr. Beltervane. So you needn't trouble to scold me, need you? You've been so kind, listening to me."

"I knew your father well—very well," he said. "I can't let you go without knowing what becomes of you."

"Couldn't you help me to get a place somewhere else, sir?" she asked.

"I might," he replied. "But, if you can't stay with us, you'd never keep out of trouble anywhere else."

"I suppose I shouldn't," admitted Eugenia sadly—"not for long."

"Have you any relations?" he asked.

"There's a sister of my father's. I don't think she'd like me."

"What sort of person is she?"

"It's horse-hair sofas — Manchester — morning prayers. I stayed there two days once, with — with my father."

Silas looked at the graceful girl with the vivid face, and pondered. He imagined her clothed otherwise, and made a little humming noise behind his closed lips.

"Well — what else?" he said at last.

Eugenia hesitated; then, expecting reproof, spoke of going on the stage.

Mr. Beltervane looked solemn.

"Of course I don't know anything about it," said Eugenia, forestalling criticism. "But I believe I could get into the chorus at one of the musical comedy places. I can dance a little, and sing a little more. And I'm not so very bad to look at, am I, Mr. Beltervane?"

Mr. Beltervane shuddered.

"You are much too pretty, my dear," he said, regarding her with an expression which, though respectful enough, yet struck her as other than fatherly.

"I think," he went on, clearing his voice nervously, "that I have something to propose which may — that might be more likely to secure your happiness."

It was some time before she made out that the kind little man in the beautiful grey frock, and the white spats over the very shiny shoes, was asking her to marry him. When she hesitated to give him an answer, he grew pressing. Was it that she did not like him? that he was too old? that she had not known him long enough?

So many questions he asked, that she was at last driven to say that there was a stronger reason against it than any of these.

"It doesn't seem fair to you, Mr. Beltervane. I'm only one of your shop-girls. I should be taking advantage of — of your kindness."

"If I'm not too old for you," he replied gaily, "I am anyhow old enough to take care of myself."

That she would not give him an answer then and there increased his respect as well as what was now become his ardour.

He would not let her go back to Sloane Street, but put her in the care of a certain good woman of his acquaintance, ready to do anything for Silas Beltervane.

Under this shield, with the wisdom of a middle-aged and at least all the eagerness of a young man, he pursued his courtship for three weeks.

One day her hostess told Eugenia with much delicacy that it was Mr. Beltervane's wish that no thought of an uncertain future should weigh in his favour; and that he intended, if she refused him, to provide for her need and comfort at least until she should marry some more fortunate man.

The next day she confessed that she loved him, and within six weeks of the affront to Lady Bideford they were married.

Lady Bideford does not forget the faces of those who offend her. Silas was in Parliament, rich beyond most rich men, and not a little courted for his philanthropy and his politics. So it came about that the new Mrs. Silas Beltervane, within a few months of her marriage, was suddenly confronted, for the purpose of introduction, by her old enemy. Lady Bideford endured it well, and talked afterwards; Eugenia carried herself with devastating sweetness and dignity, and never spoke of the encounter except to laugh over it with her husband.

But the eldest daughter of the Bidefords was at school with Eugenia's stepdaughter.

Clarissa Beltervane was alarmed rather than annoyed when she heard of her father's second marriage; secretly hurt that she had not been fetched from school to attend the ceremony; and furious, with the snobbishness of youth and her surroundings, when the Honourable Miss Frobisher told her that her stepmother was just one of the shop-girls from the Sloane Street branch.

The half-cloaked malice of the information, however, did much to make Clarissa keep her chagrin to herself; yet she nursed her injury, and dreaded the summer holidays and the probable demand for a submission which she was already determined not to render.

This mood offered better chance of happiness than its expectation; any surprise was likely to be for the good.

Eugenia, if she had been pretty and appealing to Silas at first sight, had now, with happiness and luxury, achieved a distinction and charm of bearing which attracted at once and powerfully the fastidious and generous girl on the eve of her seventeenth birthday.

Before his daughter came, Silas had been nervous; jocular and downcast by turns. Eugenia had watched him, understood him, and made certain plans and resolutions. If she could make the girl like her, she thought, she could make herself love the girl.

This and more she achieved. Clarissa had expected kisses, to be wiped off in secret. She met a hand so gracious that she desired the lips she had dreaded.

Eugenia divined the emotions of a school-girl, but did not meet the relief she read on Clarissa's face with any immediate effusion. Yet from the first meeting she began to be vicariously proud of Clarissa's straight figure, clear eyes and irreproachable bearing.

Her Spanish mother, her art-crazy father, and the Mediterranean Orientalism of her teens had given Eugenia a certain superiority in social perception over her husband, which she had not been slow to discover nor Silas to rely upon. If dad had been only a sort of drummer, she would say to herself — well, Beltervane was but a glorified linen-drafter; and dad knew things and felt things of which Silas Beltervane would never become conscious.

But to-day, for the sake of what in the Sloane Street Branch they would have called the "style" of Clarissa, she "gave Silas best," and felt even a transient pang of jealousy towards the wife whom she had succeeded.

Yielding at last to impulse, however, she crept into Clarissa's bedroom after the light was out, and kissed the face on the pillow.

The girl, remembering no such sensation in her half sleep, reached up and clung.

"Why didn't you do that before?" she asked.

"I meant to wait much longer," said Eugenia, "but I couldn't."

This began a friendship never to be broken. At the time of Stephen Gambier's accident it had lasted seven years; during which, while the mutual affection grew, what may be called its centre of gravity shifted, by degrees at first imperceptible, so that, when Clarissa was three-and-twenty and Eugenia thirty years of age, the relation was like that of two sisters whereof the younger by force of character has come to dominate the alliance.

It is improbable that Clarissa could have done anything which should seem wrong in her stepmother's eyes; it is certain that the impulsive, pleasure-loving Eugenia had done and said in those seven years many a small thing of which Clarissa disapproved. Of such disapproval the girl could at a pinch bring herself to speak—but only to Eugenia; who would, perhaps, be at first angry—if she did not laugh; yet always ended with: "You're quite right, of course, my dear. I won't do it again," and sometimes kept her word.

But Clarissa permitted no other criticism of her stepmother. It was said of her that, if you wanted to know whether that quiet, stately Miss Beltervane, whom some people called plain and others beautiful, had a temper of her own or not, you'd only got to touch Mrs. Silas Beltervane—the pretty woman that used to be behind a counter, you know—touch her with your little finger, and you'd find out.

As for Silas, he justly accounted himself happy. But in one direction the love for each other of his wife and daughter was not without dangerous tendency. As life had grown sweeter for the man, and his energies more

youthful, he had extended his public activity. Politics, philanthropy and the salvage of historic paintings from the clutch of the American amateur filled his time. He was deeply attached to Eugenia; yet in the last three years had left her more often and longer without his company that he would have thought wise or kind had he not excused himself with the thought that Clarissa was always with her.

And Clarissa had observed that Eugenia's flirtations, fickle and innocent enough, generally coincided with her father's preoccupations and absences.

This autumn she had taken a politic share in persuading him to accompany Eugenia to the Villa at Roque Brune. She had even purposely accepted an invitation which would make her arrival on the Riviera three weeks later than theirs. Eugenia had written happily to the girl of this second honeymoon with Silas, in the months she loved best of all the year on the Mediterranean; wherefore Clarissa was disposed to be angry with her father when she received from him a telegram begging her to take his place at Roque Brune as soon as she possibly could.

CHAPTER VI

CLARISSA

LATE in the afternoon of the day after his injury, Eugenia was admitted to Stephen Gambier's bedside.

In spite of the patched wound on the forehead and the twenty-four hours' growth of hair on cheeks and chin, she was at once struck by the beauty of his face.

Her mind, or some part of her, was like a highly sensitised photographic plate: Silas had deserted her for a nasty little thing about pistols: she had been in danger of her life; this poor helpless thing had caught her in strong arms. The whole damage of it had been for him; on all her body there was no mark of the splendid adventure but a very blue bruise near her right elbow. And here was the man thanking her, who had hurt him, for her goodness in housing him; and admitting, when questioned, that he had a splitting headache.

Now headache was the one pain with which Eugenia was competent to sympathise. Every remedy she had ever used or heard of crowded to her mind, but she had scarcely suggested more than eau-de-Cologne and aspirin before the valet-nurse with polite rigour evicted her. She went away, and for eighteen hours dreamed of the unshaven face and the headache.

Next morning, before she had thought of Dr. Ambrose, he was come and gone; but she paid her visit at noon on the loggia which opened from the sick-room. Here she found Gambier shaved and partly dressed, though still supine, but smiling and declaring the headache departed.

Stephen remembered nothing of her from the visit of the previous day; only dimly did he recall the face, crazy with fear, of a woman struggling to leap from a car going too

fast round the sharpest bend of a mountain road. The leap, the catching of her body and the fall were all blotted out, as is the way when the head gets the worst of it.

This face was not at all like that face of terror, but was pleasant to the man who had been all the morning cursing the fate, if not the woman, which had crippled him once again from his work.

Since crippled he was, however, he was glad now that the cause was so pretty, kindly and charming.

They talked for a few minutes. Eugenia made her husband's apology, and was told of the exhaustion following the Gateside election which had kept her guest already some five weeks from London and work.

"If I hadn't been such a fool," she burst out at this point, "you might have gone home well in a day or two."

Gambier laughed.

"Don't let that worry you, Mrs. Beltervane," he said. "I'm content where I am. Of course Dr. Ambrose and the man that looks after me at home will make this an excuse for keeping me away from the fogs a great deal longer than a collar-bone and a little bang on the head would justify. But perhaps it'll be best in the long run. It's hard to know how long one ought to rest. Yet there's one thing doctors and nurses never do seem to understand — that rest isn't rest when it's keeping you from work that's screaming to be done."

"I suppose so — I don't know. I've never worked," said Eugenia — then added, in sheer honesty — "not for the last seven years, I mean."

Of course Gambier asked what had been her work eight years ago.

"Chiefly trying on frocks and mantles," she answered, "to make ugly old women satisfied."

"Satisfied with the frocks?" asked Gambier.

"Satisfied with themselves — but sometimes you couldn't do either."

"And then, of course, they weren't satisfied with you?"

So she told him the tale of Lady Bideford; from which,

through her marriage, they came naturally to Clarissa. And just as the romance of Clarissa and Eugenia began to be interesting, Eugenia, who was, if not artist, at least show-woman born, must go to her *déjeuner* — hoping and saying that she hoped they would lunch together to-morrow.

She had her desire. *Déjeuner* next day was set on Gambier's loggia; the valet was released for his lunch, and Eugenia herself did most of the attendance upon the crippled man in the *chaise longue*.

The meal, with the cutting up of his chicken and all the other little services that must be done for a man suddenly one-handed, lasted long. During its progress Gambier made her take up the tale of herself and her step-daughter where she had left it the day before. Quite against Eugenia's intent, he received, along with a history of devotion between two women, an impression of Clarissa as a woman older than her years, austere and super-conscientious. To fill in the design he wavered between a dash of the saint and a smack of the feminist. He did not think Miss Beltervane would please him; but he was very sure, nevertheless, that he liked Mrs. Beltervane best when she spoke of Clarissa.

Eugenia Beltervane is no more mysterious and no more explicable in precise terms than any other woman. But Beltervane had imposed love and gratitude upon her when she had never felt the spontaneous upheaval caused by the passion coming from youth to youth; she had loved him with devotion, even perhaps with passion; but the golden mist which makes a world apart for a man and a woman had never enclosed nor shone upon her. Love had not been linked in her mind with beauty, as it threatened to intrude now. Physical strength and courage displayed in her interest, if not for her sake, made as romantic a starting point as any in the novels of her daily consumption; she was in her thirty-first year, and Silas, she thought, had slighted her in a time of very tender expansion; so that *the idea* of Stephen Gambier had, it seemed, suddenly rushed

in to fill a place which only its intrusion told her had always been empty.

In these first rays, however, Eugenia had no definite thought at all concerning herself and her guest. Even when Clarissa arrived, on the sixth day after the accident, she received a stream of description and praise of the distinguished man who had saved Eugenia's life, and been badly hurt in doing it, so candid and unashamed, that while she was not a little bored by the enthusiasm, she was yet quite unsuspecting of danger.

Unqualified praise, however, is never a good introduction to acquaintance; and Clarissa began to have a prejudice before she could find a peg of any sort to hang it on.

She met him at *déjeuner* on the morning after her arrival. The two women were waiting for him on the cool western loggia, an open-air parlour whence you looked down over olive and vine to the sea and the sparkling coast-line curving southward to Monaco. Eugenia was flushed by the excitement of Gambier's first descent to the common life of her house, and Clarissa, a little against the grain, was showing more sympathy than she felt when the man appeared. The natural appeal of good breeding, good appearance, his injury, the service he had done Eugenia, and his political distinction, were neutralised by something critical, almost ironic, which Clarissa thought she detected in his eyes.

Magnificently she drew herself to a little over her full height, putting out a hand which was reluctant till it touched his; when the strange position of his fingers in hers stirred a little flutter of pain in her, and she remembered that it was for Eugenia that he must greet her left-handed.

If the fall had so broken this big man with the great face—which was certainly not beautiful, let Eugenia say what she would—then how might it not have disfigured her dear Eugenia's prettiness, had the man not been there to break its force?

So Miss Beltervane took herself to task for the antagon-

onism which she had felt rising in her before even she had set eyes on him; and all might have gone well, had not Eugenia's every word and glance shown how completely her mind was filled with her new enthusiasm.

The almost childlike simplicity with which she devoted to him both thought and action was of course significant to Clarissa as it could not be to Gambier, who had never seen his hostess in a different mood, and ascribed to an expansive, grateful and uncalculating disposition behaviour which would have filled him with discomfort, if not distress, had he judged it correctly.

Being actually this morning the more interested in Clarissa, as a break in his somewhat monotonous days, he accepted all that Eugenia said to him and did for him rather as an affectionate man will take the adoration of a younger sister; so that while he was hoping to come a little nearer to this strange young woman whose eyes expressed anything but approval of Stephen Gambier, he was every moment sinking himself lower in her esteem by a manner which she translated into condescending fatuity.

The days which followed were not pleasant days for Clarissa. But for a certain anxiety about Eugenia, she would have avoided Gambier. He was, however, as she soon perceived, perversely interested in Clarissa Beltervane, and set himself patiently, at meals and such other times as Eugenia held them together, to amuse and interest her.

In this endeavour he failed less often than he thought. Politics, he discovered on the third day, made his best opening. He did not make it his lead, but waited, as was his habit, until Eugenia, with some common-place gathered from her morning paper, displayed that kind of ignorance of the thought and aims of modern Socialism for which her surroundings even more than her own lazy mind must be held responsible.

"I don't think that is what they think, nor even exactly what they want, Mrs. Beltervane," he said. "And the modern literary Socialist at least aims at securing his ends

by means very different from the methods of the French Revolution."

Eugenia, admiring everything he said because it was he who said it, asked for explanation; and Gambier put the case for the theorists, whom these two women were accustomed to hear condemned with the shibboleths of robust ignorance, so lucidly and so eloquently that Clarissa forgot to be bored during the exposition, and at the end had fears for her inherited political faith.

"But then, Mr. Gambier," she said, "if you believe all that——"

"I don't believe. I'm only saying the best there is to be said for somebody else's belief," he explained. "It's my business to be an advocate. In the end, if you understand the other side better, you can find better weapons against them, too."

"Well," said Eugenia, "you've built up a very pretty house, and it looks so thoroughly habitable, that for the sake of our orthodoxy and our morals, I do think you ought to show us how to knock it down again."

Clarissa listened well as he proceeded to a demolition as able as the previous construction. At the moment she was full of admiration for the skill with which he handled his argument and the imagination with which his points were illustrated. But afterwards she became aware that there remained with her an impression not altogether pleasant.

They had been sitting almost till sundown by the fountain which plays into a marble basin in a circular clearing of the orange-grove; and as they rose to go indoors, Stephen said, smiling: "I believe Miss Beltervane feels that there must be some dishonesty in the man who is able to argue both sides of a question."

At the time she answered quite good-humouredly: "When he does it as well as you do, Mr. Gambier, I almost think there must be."

But afterwards she asked herself: "Is there anything that a man with a tongue like that could not persuade Eugenia to believe?"

As the days went by, she tried to force herself to speak to Eugenia—to caution her; and broke down each time on the same difficulty. Eugenia seemed so utterly unconscious of her absurd attitude! It was a position which Clarissa, not without reason, thought her capable, with luck, of abandoning, heart-whole, to-morrow. Would it not, then, be both dangerous and cruel to force her into self-consciousness, by charging her here, in this sweet, pleasure-stimulating climate, in the days of ripening grape and fig, of the wine-press and the golden sunshine, hot at noon, crisp and thrilling towards sunset—to charge her baldly with sentimental infidelity to the good Silas, and, by sequence of argument, to hint at the danger of that unfaithfulness upon which the world sets its black mark?

Clarissa remembered a middle-aged woman, overheard in her own childhood, saying to a younger: "Leave it alone, my dear. It's only putting ideas into a head they haven't reached yet, thank God!"

The woman was right, she believed: the precious Eugenia had never thought an evil thing in her life; she had seldom, reflected the woman who loved her, thought at all. Left alone, the little passion might slip away into a grateful memory, and no harm done; for none knew better than Clarissa how well her father was loved by his wife. And yet—yet there was fear.

Should she attack the man? To do it without making light of the woman she worshipped as one loves the younger, lighter thing, seemed impossible—or to need such wonderful ways of understanding people and of putting things, as this very man himself, of all men and women she knew, alone possessed. And if he knew so much already, surely he already knew all she could tell him—that this pretty woman was taken in his snare. If he did not, would his vanity resist the telling? For, partly from her great love of the woman that had been wisely good to the school-girl, partly from her own inexperience, she could not believe any man proof against the fascination of Eugenia.

It is characteristic more of the type of her affection for

her stepmother than of her own temperament, that not one thought of blame to be cast upon Eugenia presented itself to her mind. In like situation, Clarissa would have called herself the worst "names" she knew.

Upon the thirteenth day after Gambier's accident, she had at last made up her mind that any form of interference was worse in its probable result than inactivity, and that the notion of personally attacking the man who could make the worse reason, if he pleased, appear the better, was a counsel of desperation; and then, within an hour, that very folly was forced upon her by a combination, as it seemed, of ill-luck, Eugenia's infatuation and her own anxiety. Gambier, no doubt, in a general sense, was of them all most to blame; but in this particular moment he seemed just the football.

It was still doctor's orders that Gambier should go to bed early; and Eugenia had for the last week sat down to dinner in time to give them an hour of his company after it was over. Thus it came that the letter-bag was brought about ten minutes past eight o'clock, while Eugenia was pouring their coffee at table.

Among his own letters passed to him by Clarissa, Gambier found one in a writing unfamiliar. Clarissa, he noticed, had one addressed in the same; and when he looked up, in response to Eugenia's formal request for permission to read her letters, he could not but notice that that which she was opening was inscribed with the same unmistakable handwriting.

From his he had hardly learned more than that it was from Silas Beltervane, when he became aware that something was wrong with Eugenia. He saw that Clarissa had done the same, and had her eyes fixed upon her stepmother with an expression at once searching and sorrowful. Eugenia regarded neither of her companions, but read the letter from her husband slowly, with lips that moved as if she were spelling out the words of a language strange to her. Then suddenly her face lost its colour, and Gambier thought she was going to faint.

"What is it, Eugenia?" asked the girl, leaning towards her.

With an odd appearance of stiffness, the woman rose to her feet, dropping her letter on the table, and moving with difficulty towards the door. Gambier reached it first, opening it with his left hand; with a gliding rush Clarissa overtook her, and the two passed out without a glance for their guest.

He picked up his letter from Beltervane. There was courteous inquiry as to his recovery, some words on the importance and success of the business which compelled him to be so bad a host, and a promise of reparation to begin from the moment he should reach the Château des Nuages — not later, that was, than Saturday evening next.

So Stephen jumped to the conclusion that Eugenia, being unhappy with her husband, was too bitterly disappointed by the shortening of his absence to conceal her chagrin.

He now remembered that, except in telling him how Lady Bideford's insolence had led to her marriage, she had hardly mentioned her husband at all.

The butler returned, and brought round to him the coffee Eugenia had poured for him, cut the cigar he chose and left him. He had smoked a third of it when Clarissa returned.

He rose to meet her, expressing his hope that Mrs. Beltervane was feeling better.

She sat down in the chair she had left, but did not immediately answer him. He noticed that her delicate and uniform tinge of colour was changed to a stone-like whiteness, and that her eyes were brilliant — with anger, he thought.

Like her father, Clarissa had the repute of an equable temper. The few that knew or guessed the force of her anger were those who had ventured, as she now believed Stephen Gambier had done, to treat lightly, unkindly, or with any lack of respect the woman she loved.

She knew her temper was out of hand now, and she intended using it to Eugenia's advantage as well as to the

satisfaction of her animosity against this mischievous man. But she was in a dilemma: she could not tell him what she thought of him without implying that of Eugenia which she felt ready to kill any man for thinking. But she reflected: "It is certain he thinks that already, or he would not act as he does"; and so answered him.

"Yae," she said. "Mrs. Beltervane is better for the moment. But she will not be well again while you are here, Mr. Gambier."

He was shocked, yet a little excited: there was going to be a fight, and his spirit rose to the challenge.

"I don't understand you, Miss Beltervane," he replied; yet he understood enough to feel angry on Eugenia's account.

"I think you do. If you do not," said Clarissa, "I must make you understand."

"I gather that you wish me to — to return to my hotel. If you were officially my hostess, Miss Beltervane, I would do so to-night. Unfortunately I have here a very kind letter from Mr. Beltervane, asking me on no account to get well before he returns on Saturday evening. So you see I am obliged to wait till he comes."

As well as her beautiful mouth — beautiful even when its kindlier curves had disappeared — as nearly as the mouth could accomplish sneering, Clarissa sneered.

"Unless, of course ——" began Gambier, and hesitated.

"Unless what?" asked Clarissa bluntly.

"Unless Mrs. Beltervane has expressed a wish to — a wish that I should go. That would alter the case entirely."

Here Clarissa lost hold on herself.

"You know perfectly well," she cried angrily, "that she has done nothing of the sort. I wish she had."

"Then I don't see how I can do what you wish," he replied. "Shall I have an opportunity of speaking to Mrs. Beltervane to-night? I was afraid she was too much indisposed."

"She is," said Clarissa.

"Then you cannot expect me to run away in the dark, with no reasonable excuse for host or hostess."

For a moment Clarissa seemed to drop her anger; she supplicated.

"Oh, Mr. Gambier," she said, "if you only will, I'll find the excuse. I'll let you know what I say, so that you can back it up. Do—please."

The look of his face made this her last gentle word of that evening.

"If I were to do what you ask," he said in a very low voice, "the doing would still be mine. If I found myself forced to so ill-bred an act, I should prefer the covering falsehoods to be mine too."

Clarissa could not speak, and Gambier, by this time angry himself, continued:

"And you haven't even yet given me the slightest idea of what I have done to make you suggest this absurd behaviour."

He had moved round the table to Eugenia's place. Slowly but neatly, with his left hand he poured her a fresh cup of coffee, and brought it round to her, going back for the sugar-bowl.

"You do not seem the kind of person," he said, "that turns a cripple out of doors at ten o'clock of the night."

Something in his voice, coming upon what she began to see was not only her failure but her folly, gave the girl a sudden lump in the throat, and a dreadful struggle not to burst into tears; in which she prevailed only to the increase of her anger.

Meantime, seeing her distress,

"Drink this coffee," he said gently, as if the ordinary act of kindness was natural even in the midst of wrath. "I can see you are really disturbed about something. You have troubled me also."

She drank the coffee in a gulp, without sugar; and vaguely felt the strangeness of accepting kindness of an enemy.

Gambier, when she had done, tapped on the table; and for the moment he had the eyes and bearing of counsel examining a slippery witness.

"Now, tell me," he said: "what is my crime?"

"You have made love to my stepmother," said Clarissa boldly, "ever since you came into the house."

His first feeling was admiration of the girl's courage. He could have laughed in sheer pleasure.

But his face was grave enough as he answered her.

"I don't think, Miss Beltervane," he said, "for all your indignation, that you understand the insult contained in your accusation. To make love to his neighbour's wife, in his neighbour's house, while the house is sheltering and the wife tending him, and the neighbour himself on a journey! But I'm not going to be angry; and to prove that, much as I am shocked by the charge, I yet admire your courage, I will tell you that I have no feeling for Mrs. Beltervane beyond admiration of her beauty and kindness, and friendship of that somewhat protective kind which a man naturally feels for the woman to whom he has had the luck to be of service."

Clarissa rose, hardened in the suspicion which she called belief.

"You deprive yourself, Mr. Gambier," she said, "of the one possible excuse. Even I have not accused you of mere heartless philandering. But you accuse yourself."

"You had better let the discussion end here, Miss Beltervane," he replied, disgusted as well as angry. "Every word of it has been an outrage."

"I shall do my best," said Clarissa, "to prevent your meeting again, until ——"

He interrupted her sharply.

"Be quiet," he said; and the sternness of his voice made her heart leap like a scolded child's. "In spite of your pluck, and the great affection you have for the lady you think you are defending, you are behaving like an infant — a silly child — so that I can hardly keep you from insulting

her as well as me. If you fancy that you know more than I do, for God's sake have the decency to keep it to yourself."

Bosom, neck, shoulders and face, Clarissa's smooth, clear skin was encrimsoned; she was of those who resent a sharp lesson the more for their readiness of apprehension.

Gambier felt sorry for the girl. She did not speak another word, but bent her head slightly, without looking at him, as she passed him holding the door.

Next morning, in concession to Clarissa's anxiety, he sent a note down to Eugenia, asking for a carriage to take him to Mentone, where he had business. So much stronger did he find himself, that he was sure Ambrose would not disapprove. He would hunt the good doctor up and take him somewhere to lunch. Meantime, was there any commission he could carry out for Mrs. Beltervane?

So, from ten on that Friday morning until about half-past six in the afternoon, poor Eugenia did not set eyes on her idol.

CHAPTER VII

THE WATCH TOWER

WITHOUT admitting the truth of Stephen Gambier's statement that he had neither felt love nor made it, Clarissa could not deny that his attitude to herself had been in any case correct. Though her anger against him still burned, and much though she felt she disliked the man, she yet admitted to her conscience that he had treated her at first with forbearance, and at last with a severity which she had deserved.

Eugenia's nervousness and preoccupation clouded the morning.

"I can't think," she said at their mid-day breakfast, "what can have taken Mr. Gambier to Mentone this morning — nor what sort of business the poor man can have there. I hope he wasn't put out by my leaving the table like that last night. You did make my apologies to him, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes — and he quite understood," replied Clarissa.

"My neuralgia was simply awful," Eugenia continued. "Oh, yes — the pain's gone now, but it has left my head and face all sore to the touch, like bruises."

As Eugenia fingered her brows woefully, Clarissa, not doubting the neuralgia, yet felt for the first time that her best friend was lying to her — or lying, at least, against the friendship. Trusted, Clarissa could have counselled — could have known or guessed how it was with the man, and helped the woman to find the best road to safety and self-respect. Shut out, she could, for all her tenderness, do nothing.

She brooded over the rupture that might come, if Eugenia should learn how she had treated Mr. Gambier last

night; then over the misery that might fall upon her father — until, at last, about four in the afternoon, she went walking by herself, trying to shake off the presage of evil which held her.

It was not more than four years since her father had bought, and barely three since he had completed the renovation of the old building which he now called, with the English passion for the sentimental naming of a dwelling-place, the *Château des Nuages*. Clarissa had visited it but twice before; and her constant companionship with Eugenia had taken her oftener to Nice, Bordighera, Cannes and Monte Carlo in the car, than afoot among the hills. At this time of the year the mountain ways were full of attraction for her, and there was one in particular which she had a mind to follow.

As has been said, the road from the *Château des Nuages* to the *Route de la Corniche*, skirting the high-set walled town of Roque Brune, had been brought to a state befitting the opulence of Silas Beltervane. But, beyond the *château*, most of the ways were mere mule-tracks to the mountain villages and little towns, like honey-combs of stone, perched high on spur or shoulder of the hills for safety from pagan galleys.

Three hundred yards from her father's door Clarissa began to scale the hill-side. She scrambled up some thirty feet, and came upon a track running narrowly along a ridge. This, rounding a small spur of the hill, led her by a sharp decline to a paved path known locally as the Roman Road. She knew neither where it left the coast nor whither it led; but had a vague notion that, if she followed it for some two miles, she would come to the town of Gorbio. Gorbio, however, was not her object.

The track took her through a grove of chestnuts, clumps of oak and patches of *arbutus*; and between them she looked out on descending ridges of olive and vine. About the end of her first mile she found that she had dipped so far on the eastward shoulder of the hill that the low sun had left her. And soon she came to the rough path up the hill-

side of which she was in search, leading back toward the ridge and the sunlight.

It must take her, she had been told, to a small stone house where lived a sort of hermit—mad English, they called him. Once or twice she had caught sight of a tall figure, extraordinarily lean, passing the gates of Les Nuages. But one of the gardeners had told her that the mad Englishman was too proud to use the new road often; that, when he must walk down to Roque Brune or Mentone, Nice or Villefranche, he would generally use the mountain paths till he reached the *Corniche*. "And always on the road when he comes to it, he walks still—never the train, nor the carriage, nor the automobile."

"Walk?" Clarissa had exclaimed. "But he's lame."

"He limps—yes. It was a wound, they say. But he is strong as a mule at his own gait. And, finally, he is mad—mad of religion."

In her revolt against the oppression of an evil which she could not mend, this gossip and her interest in the melancholy figure of the hermit twice seen in the distance, had come back to her, and she was now mounting the path which she had been told led past his house. This at last she came upon—a stone cottage built of natural boulders, large and small, joined with coarse mortar. It had been made fit for civilised occupation with a roof of new red-fluted tiles; the windows had been enlarged and well framed and glazed.

In front of the door little figs were drying in trays; and bunches of grapes, hung upon a trellis, were slowly shrivelling into raisins; and here, too, just within the tapering shadow of a hill-top bearing south-west of his cottage, sat, in a shabby wicker chair, his head bent over a book, the strange man of whom she had heard more than she had seen.

The windings of the path had led her close upon him before she perceived that the little stone wall, about three feet high, hardly saved her presence from being indiscreet. Yet she stood staring—held by the shock of something

strange, and, as she called it afterwards, fiercely serene, which she beheld in the face that was raised to her own.

The man rose, laid down his book and came towards her.

He was of great height, of rather narrow build, extremely thin, and walked, as she had observed already, with a limp of the right leg. Arms unusually long ended in great hands hardened with work and sun; while the face, at first sight, was remarkable only for its immense moustache, drooping like the tusks of a walrus, and for the vivid brightness of the red-lidded, burning blue gaze.

For a moment they looked at each other, her large, soft-grey eyes refusing to flinch from the inquisition of the blue.

"You have lost your way?" said the man at last, giving his statement the merest lift of interrogation.

"No. I think this is a public path," replied Clarissa, gentle of voice as unyielding of carriage.

"Nobody comes here," said the man.

Clarissa smiled.

"If people are afraid of you, sir," she said, "that does not make the pathway yours."

"You are right, young lady," he answered, almost smiling back; "they *are* afraid of me."

"Why?" asked Clarissa.

"They are afraid I shall save their souls."

"Can you do that? I thought," she replied, "that it depended upon somebody else."

"It was never done by chopping logic," retorted the man.

"I think the person makes a great deal of difference," persisted the girl.

"Are *you* safe?" asked the man.

"That's rather too private a matter to discuss, until we know each other better, don't you think?" she asked in reply. "It's a very interesting subject, though. In case we should meet again, I'm Miss Beltervane. We live at the big house they call Les Nuages."

The grey, drooping moustache twitched as if the man would have spoken. But he did not.

"Won't you tell me your name?" asked Clarissa sweetly.

"You may call me Evans," he said slowly. "I was once in the Army."

"You were wounded, weren't you?" she asked.

The haggard face frowned once more, and the eyes glowed even brighter.

"Yes," he replied, "I have been wounded." He bent his head, turned his back and went into his house. But Clarissa felt that memory, not her intrusion, had hurt him.

During her walk home the trouble of this strange man — trouble which she did not know — shut out that awaiting her, which she felt she could not remedy. But the hermit was forgotten when she saw the car which had taken Stephen Gambier to Mentone in the morning driving empty from the front gate.

She went to her room. Meeting Eugenia's maid on the way, she learned that her stepmother had taken tea in the orange-grove, by the fountain, and was, thought Christine, still there.

As she changed her frock and drank tea in her own room, Clarissa persuaded herself there was no need to go down to the orange-grove. Doubtless she would find Gambier there as well as Eugenia; and she shrank from giving the man ground to say that she played the duenna. She looked from her window, one of several on this side of the house whence the fountain was visible. And there she saw Eugenia alone, reading.

Like all the best rooms of the building, Clarissa's looked southward over a terraced garden falling away from the house. Until Silas Beltervane had built his residence into the old shell of the ruin, some peasant's *métairie* had come right up to its walls; and in taking this for his garden he had preserved the terraced conformation of the land.

The best only of the olives had been left standing, many being replaced with the most beautiful shrubs and trees which could be coaxed to grow on the shielded, sunny slope. On the lower tiers the orange, magnolia and oleander had succeeded, considering the altitude, beyond ex-

pectation; and the whole garden was sweet with a mixed charm of wildness and cultivation.

Once you were down amongst its winding paths, its unexpected flights of steps from terrace to terrace, its little arched wells with the water hiding under cataracts of maidenhair, and its grassy platforms, where, in their seasons, the poppies and the flaming red anemones, the sweet violets, white and purple, the crocuses and the narcissi grew as freely among the thin grass-blades as, thirty years ago, before the tourist came with his blight, they grew without a hand to help them in the unwallled places and the torrent-beds — once you were down amongst it all, the places were secret, and, in the late and the early hours of the sun, mysterious.

High up on the left side of this garden stood a square tower of grey stone, built, doubtless, partly as a refuge — for its age was far greater than even the walls of the house — and partly that its roof might be a point of vantage for sighting and a station from which to signal Saracen sails.

In the days of its use, it had had no door below; later they had cut through its four-foot wall to find in the ground floor storage for the slow-burning fuel called *sansa* — the crushed stone of the olive, exhausted by the mill of all removable oil, and good for keeping the poor man's fire burning all night. There were still, not far off, the stone pits of an olive mill, serving now for a rain-water tank. But Silas Beltervane, in his zeal for the remoter past, had filled the lower entrance of the tower, and had built outside a rough wooden stairway to the ancient door, seventeen feet from the ground, in place of the ladder which used, no doubt, to be drawn up after the last refugee had mounted it. Within, by a stone stair, twisting and uneven, one climbed to the flat, battlemented roof.

This roof, when the sun was not too strong, was with Clarissa a favourite place for sitting, reading and dreaming alone. And now, when she had changed her tweed skirt for the cool white she had desired as she walked home, the girl thought of this high place; there she would

soothe and steady herself for the stress of the evening before her. She wished she were of those with whom headache will serve at any hour as plea for seclusion; she could then leave them to pick out for themselves the knots of their tangle. One explicitly, the other implicitly had rejected her aid; yet she could not, without being herself more truthful than she wished, plead now what her perfect health had prevented her ever pleading before. She must go through that dinner; and therefore she would have an hour to herself on the watch-tower.

She reached her haven unseen; and there, looking round a horizon one quarter illimitable sea and three-quarters imprisoning hills, she was in a fair way to get the peace and strength she desired.

She was even letting her thought wander idly back to the man in the melancholy valley who had asked after her soul — was even wondering how, indeed, her soul was faring, when she looked idly down into the garden.

From her tower the opening in the orange-grove, with the spurting water of the fountain, the chairs and their green and purple cushions, the white figure of Eugenia and the grey-flannelled form of Stephen Gambier were even clearer to the sight, though further below, than seen from her bedroom window.

She was annoyed, and did not wish to look; yet could not, for a moment, withdraw her eyes. And in that moment she saw the woman, as if in answer to something said by the man, rise, move her arms and body as if in some agony of feeling, and then clasp her hands, perhaps in shame, over her eyes. She swayed as if falling, and his free arm came about her body, catching her. She let her head fall on his shoulder, and Clarissa turned her eyes away, regretting that they had looked as much as what she had seen.

Perhaps it was accident, perhaps it was the thought of how from her bedroom window she had seen Eugenia alone in that same opening of the orange-trees, that took Clarissa's eyes towards the house. In that mass of masonry, pierced

by so many windows, most of the *jalousies* were closed, and no face was seen looking out. She saw her own window open as she had left it. The next belonged to her father's dressing-room; its blinds were shut. As if it were safer that not even his room should look out upon the orange-grove down there, even though Silas himself were hundreds of miles away, she sighed with a momentary relief — and then gasped with terror to see that very pair of green shutters sharply pushed back.

At the opening stood a man — and she hoped, so quickly did he move away from it, that her terrible thought had been mistaken. But he was back as quickly, with field-glasses at his eyes; their angle told her at what he was looking, and his grey coat, the grey hair almost white, and the poise as well as the movements of his body told her he was Silas Beltervane, come home twenty-four hours before his set time, to find —

Crouching behind the battlements, she crept to the stair, descended to the garden, and ran, softly, swiftly and by the paths most secret from those dreadful windows, to the orange-grove.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ORANGE GROVE

BELTERVANE had received official assurance of his success in the matter of the Hawkin's Clip a day sooner than he expected it; for Beltervane, though of little active use to his party, might be dangerous in defection, the clip was a very good clip indeed, and party funds cried day and night for nourishment.

He had written out a telegram announcing the Friday rather than the Saturday for his arrival at Les Nuages; but suddenly, being light-hearted with success, he conceived the boyish project of "giving Eugenia a surprise."

He thought of the light he had sometimes seen in her dark eyes when he had turned up unexpected; he remembered that she had been nursing an injury against him when he left her. He had, he believed, half softened her by sending out Clarissa; but he was not sure that he did not even yet owe her reparation.

In a measure he knew his Eugenia; had the brains, had he cared to use them, to understand her very well indeed. But that greatest effort of all—the learning and understanding of other people's desires, motives and powers was rarely made in full by Silas Beltervane except in business. With an enemy, now, it was necessary to get at the heart of things; or with a friend, if you dealt with him. But those you loved were none the less lovable, he found, for keeping some of their mystery.

His half knowledge of and great affection for his wife led him to suspect, now that the great matter of the cart-ridge-clip was settled, that Eugenia, not merely in this last desertion, but in many during the last three years, had

hardly been treated with the consideration which he had meant always to show her.

Somehow this reminded him of Eugenia's love of jewels, particularly emeralds. So he went to Bond Street, and there drove a bargain as long as it was hard, and in consequence missed the boat he had meant to take from Dover. The result was a night journey from Paris in the ordinary Marseilles express, instead of the *train de luxe*. So old-fashioned was he in some small matters, that he preferred his solitary *coupé lit* to more crowded and burdensome comforts; but was annoyed in finding that a long wait at Marseilles would make him late for dinner at Les Nuages, and take half the joy out of his "surprise."

He had looked forward to that jolly dinner, to Clarissa, to Eugenia, and even, unconsciously, to boasting delicately a little to the distinguished Stephen Gambier of his influence in high places; and he had been careful to bring back with him the automatic pistol adapted to the Hawkin's Clip.

Therefore, at Marseilles, he hired the best car he could get, and accomplished the hundred odd miles in a time which would have outraged the feelings of any English county Bench.

Over the last mile of that hill road which his money had made so smooth he drove very quietly, not wishing his household to hear a car where cars were so few. Letting himself in, he sent the man who had travelled with him to give strict orders that Mrs. and Miss Beltervane should not be informed of his arrival; was told that they were among the terraces; went to his room to wash; used his glasses for a first sight of Eugenia, and saw her, as Clarissa had seen her, in Stephen Gambier's arms.

The valet, himself hot and dusty from the journey, was putting out clothes for his master; an open kit-bag was on the floor, a dressing-case gaped on the bed, and from it stared at Silas the automatic pistol, carelessly packed by himself with its Hawkin's Clip in position.

The servant's back was turned when his master left the

window. He told afterwards how Old Symphony had stooped over his dressing-case and had taken something from it, and then turned on him "the most awful white face you ever saw." Then, how he had said in a voice most curious: "Stay here, Godwin, till I come back. Close the *persiennes* at once"; how he had left the room and gone down the corridor, running softly; and how he, Godwin, had at once closed those green shutters, and set himself down to read the French novel which had so closely occupied Old Symphony between Paris and Lyons; and how that was all he knew.

Asked if he had not himself taken a look from that window, he had replied: "My dear, that sort of thing isn't done among the best people. Besides, I never look where I might see things they might want my oath about. It's — well, it's bad for the career."

Poor Silas Beltervane left his house in the grip of anger such as he had suffered from in his boyhood and feared ever since. This time it was prompted by another passion, almost new to him; and he was over fifty years of age. He knew the spot he was hurrying towards, swift, silent, with dreadful face; he knew that murder must come of it, if he found what he had already seen; and he knew that nothing could make him believe he had not seen it.

Even his face was grey, but he was no longer a symphony.

His daughter, however, had the start of him, the longer legs, the stronger passion and the better knowledge of that ordered wilderness. She also, it is true, had her anger, lacking the small justice of his. For however she might be brought, by this means or that, to blame Eugenia, she could never find in her heart for the childish woman the wrath that wills harm. Clarissa the woman leaned dangerously to the side of reason, divinely in the direction of justice; yet for her what Eugenia did well was Eugenia's merit; what ill, Eugenia's misfortune. Eugenia's misfortune just now was Mr. Stephen Gambier; and with Gambier Clarissa was wroth beyond words.

When she reached the open space about the fountain, Eugenia's faintness, if faintness there had been, was gone. Her hands were on the man's shoulders, her face lifted to his, and her mouth was pouring out words from which the girl caught no meaning before her presence had stopped their flow for ever. Clarissa, even in that intense moment, was contradictorily annoyed to observe that Gambier's sound arm hung by his side; she had a feeling that this was less than Eugenia deserved, that it did not fit with Clarissa's theory—and therefore she blamed the man.

She laid hands at once on her stepmother, speaking in a low voice and fewest words.

"My father has seen you. He is coming. He will kill," she said. "Go to the tower. You have been there for an hour. In five minutes, go to your room and dress for dinner."

Eugenia, terror-struck, turned and ran by the path Clarissa had used to reach them. But as she turned, the girl snatched from her shoulders the scarf of black lace—a Spanish mantilla which she affected in the gardens.

Gambier moved a pace as if he would follow; but Clarissa seized his arm.

"Not you," she said. Then, "Hush!" she added, listening.

Gambier heard a man's feet on stone steps, perhaps two terraces above them. Courage is not highest in a false position, and to both man and girl there was something ominous in the passionate irregularity of the footfalls.

Clarissa was twisting the scarf round the golden-brown mass of her hair.

"Will you play the game?" she whispered.

"What game?" he asked as softly.

"Mine. It's the only way."

She stood close to him, her hands half raised, like one ready to bring them together to catch the expected ball; but her head was strained aside, listening, and her face was like the flesh of the dead. He divined her intent.

The steps were very near.

"Very well," said Gambier. "It's up to you."

The waiting hands went to his shoulders, and the head with its dull gold gleaming through the black meshes sank on his breast. It was the game he had foreseen, and Gambier responded by holding her in an embrace as natural as he could make it.

Between his body and his one hand he felt the shudder of disgust which shook her.

Beltervane was upon them now, but Gambier would not glance in his direction until he should be within arm's length. To look his part the better, he bent his head, and seemed to press his lips to Clarissa's hair. Light though it was, she felt their touch, and unreasoning anger brought the colour back to her face.

Their lower part of the gardens was now in the twilight of the hills—a limpid light, grey below, and greenish above.

Silas Beltervane stood still, making a sound in his throat—a mere effort to speak, with almost no thought behind it.

Gambier turned his head to him, quickly, as if then first conscious that he and Clarissa were not alone. Something shone faintly in Beltervane's right hand.

Not even for a father supposed angry did it seem romantically orthodox to drop the girl like a hot coal; so Stephen bent to her ear, speaking as distinctly as softly.

"Clarissa," he said, "it's your father."

The clear utterance of her name saved one or other of them from a bullet.

"Clarissa!" exclaimed Silas. They knew he was astonished to find his daughter where he had thought to find his wife; but the exclamation was open to the simple interpretation.

The girl raised her head, and drew away from Gambier's arms, finding that a becoming confusion made no great demand upon her invention. She took two steps towards her father, and stood, covering her face with her hands.

"I — I — we ——" she began, and found herself truly unable to get out another word.

Gambier, now that he must speak, felt the absurd weight of a foolish position roll off him. It gave way to a sudden desire to laugh, sternly repressed.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Beltervane," he said, with his gravest manner and kindest voice. "It is for me to explain the circumstances to Mr. Beltervane."

He turned to Silas.

"You know who I am, sir. You have seen me before, when I was not able to take advantage of our rather violent introduction. I wish there had been time for me to show my gratitude for all the kindness I have received in your house, before rushing into an explanation which I am afraid will hardly avail to excuse my conduct. But fate — circumstances — my feelings, sir, have been too strong for me. Forgive me, then, if I ask now what in any case I must have asked very soon — ask you to let me marry your daughter."

At another time this stilted little speech might have struck the astute Silas as lacking both in ardour and simplicity. But Silas was suffering a tremendous revulsion of feeling.

When his daughter had raised her head, veiled partly in Eugenia's black scarf, he had felt a flood of such joy as comes to few except in the waking from evil dreams of guilt. He was glad someone else was talking, for he could not utter a word. Mechanically he slipped the pistol into his pocket, and believed, thinking of it afterwards, that neither his daughter nor Gambier had seen it.

The first part of what Gambier had said was mere sound to him; but the final words he grasped and answered.

"First of all, and for the first time," he said, "let us shake hands, Mr. Gambier. I'm sorry to see you still need the sling."

Their hands met, and the younger felt the trembling of the elder.

"Only for a day or two longer," said Gambier.

"It reminds me, though—if I needed reminding—of the debt I owe you," Silas went on,—“a debt of that kind for which, thank Heaven, payment is impossible. I wish, my dear,” he said, turning to Clarissa, “that you had seen it.”

Clarissa shuddered. “I am glad I didn’t,” she said simply—and then, in the midst of her confusion and distress of mind, remembered that, but for Stephen Gambier, there might have been no Eugenia to get into trouble and be helped out of it.

“The finest thing I ever saw,” continued Beltervane, growing every moment more self-possessed, and glancing from Gambier to his daughter with a kindly curiosity.

There was a short pause, awkward at least for the two conspirators, before he spoke again.

“And about this other matter, Mr. Gambier, which seems to have been accomplished with a similar rapidity of design and certainty of touch, I will ask you to come to my study and talk it over after dinner. I shall hardly have time to make myself decent. Clarissa, I motored all the way from Marseilles. The dust was awful. I—I only ran out into the garden in hope of taking Eugenia by surprise.”

“When I saw her last,” said Clarissa, in a low voice rather unsteady, “she was going to the watch-tower. If she’s not there now, she’s probably gone to her room.”

“I will go back by the tower,” said Silas. “I’m afraid I interrupted an interesting conversation. But don’t keep dinner waiting, Clary. I’m starving.”

Then he would have left them, but Clarissa stopped him, asking softly, was he angry with her. He kissed her, patted her cheek, whispered something in her ear, and was gone.

She turned and looked at Gambier; then she laughed, with a tone which angered him. But before either found a word to say, their privacy was again invaded. Christine, Eugenia’s maid, approached by the path Beltervane had used.

"Madame has sent me," she said, "to find her mantilla. She has somewhere dropped it."

Clarissa unwrapped the lace from her head.

"Tell Madame I found it by the foot of the watch-tower," she replied. "Is Madame dressing?"

"Madame dresses," said Christine, and disappeared.

When her footsteps could no longer be heard,

"That was a brilliant touch," said Stephen.

"Which—what touch?" asked Clarissa irritably.

"The black lace," replied Gambier. "An excellent detail." And he looked at her hair.

"Oh, yes," admitted Clarissa. "The detail was all right. But the plot—the plan——"

"The fundamental idea?" suggested Gambier.

"Yes," said Clarissa. "It's the lie—the deception of a dear, good man like my father—that's all disgusting and abominable——"

"Quite so. I sympathise with your feeling," he answered kindly. "But think of the alternative. Being clever enough to think of such a scheme, weren't you just bound to use it?"

"D'you think so?" she asked miserably, as if her need of sympathy made her forget his iniquity.

"I think it was absolutely necessary," said Gambier.

This earned him little grace.

"And who was it," she demanded, aflame once more, "that made it necessary?"

Getting no answer from his face nor his lips,

"You seem to forget," she went on fiercely, "that the whole horrid business is your fault."

Still he did not speak. Determined to goad him to some defence which might justify her admiration of the support he had given her, she went further still.

"I do not suppose you would dare," she said, "to repeat what you said to me last night."

"Repetition is generally ineffective," said Gambier quietly. "Look here, Miss Beltervane: so far I've helped

you pretty well. We've got to carry it on for a bit, or the bottom falls out of your plan. Let's do it well. Feeling sore with each other's only going to rub the gilt off the gingerbread."

"What d'you mean?" asked Clarissa.

"Chip the paint off this stucco betrothal," he explained. "It's only a bit of stage scenery. Let's throw the lights on it the right way and keep it standing steady till the act's over. I will, if you will. I shan't be in this part of the world much longer. Then there can come a few letters, a disagreement, and in a week or two you can go to that good father of yours and tell him how mistaken you have been in Mr. Stephen Gambier, and that it's all at an end."

She looked at him seriously, with a face reasonable and very white.

"Yes. You are quite right. Thank you. It was foolish to speak angrily. I'm sorry. What shall I do?" she asked meekly.

"Have a bath. Dress very prettily for dinner. Be jolly to everybody else, and as nice to me as you can manage. The shyness proper to the circumstances will help you out. I'll do the rest. Don't ignore your partner's call for trumps, and — may I say something else?"

"Please — anything," said Clarissa.

"Don't make heavy weather of it with Mrs. Beltervane. It's going to cost her less, I think, than you. I can see — pardon me — how deeply attached you are to each other. I can see also that your very love of her might make you, perhaps, severe. Don't be. The less you say, the less she'll think of it. Now, you won't call me rude if I go to dress? This arm, you know, makes me very clumsy, and I left my man at Mentone. He wanted a day off, poor chap, and he deserved it."

A little thrill of pity for the wounded shoulder went through her. She was angry with herself for feeling it, yet could not forget how well his injury deserved her consideration.

"I will ask my father," she said, "to send his man to you."

"Thank you," replied Gambier. "But I think I can manage."

They walked to the house in silence, and parted with a phrase of bare courtesy.

CHAPTER IX

THE CULPRITS

HIS head was so busy with Eugenia, his conscience so sore with the wrong he thought he had done her, and his heart so full of joy in the wreck of his jealousy, that Silas Beltervane hardly found room even for surprise in the matter of Clarissa and Stephen Gambier. He supposed young people did do these things in a hurry sometimes; then, laughing at the memory of his own offer of marriage, at the age of forty-five, in his first meeting with Eugenia, hurried up the steps of the tower to find nothing but the book which Clarissa had left there. It was a novel of Bourget's, with Eugenia's name scrawled across the yellow paper cover. Luck too was playing the game.

When he reached his own corridor, a certain shyness, born of his shame, made him shrink from knocking at his wife's door.

He passed it and crept into his dressing-room.

Godwin stood awaiting him. The French novel lay closed on the table. The evening clothes were set out.

"You can get my bath ready," said Silas. "I shan't want you afterwards."

Eugenia's breath came faster as she heard her husband's step in the passage, but the new colour in her cheeks faded as his feet passed her door. Christine was brushing her hair. Through the door to Silas's dressing-room she could hear him dismissing Godwin. She trembled a little, but followed suit.

"Christine," she said, "you can leave my hair down for a minute or two. I have dropped my mantilla somewhere in the garden. Please go and look for it. Miss Beltervane

may have found it. I don't want it to lie out of doors all night."

When the maid was gone, she rose and took a step towards the door of Silas's room; but checked herself in horror: theoretically, she did not know that Silas was at home. But the suspense seemed unbearable, when she wanted nothing so much as to get it over and know the worst. The worst, too, must surely be bad; for if Clarissa had succeeded in covering her — which seemed impossible — or even if Silas had not seen what Clarissa had seen, surely he would have come to her door.

Already the fright she had had, and the fear she was still suffering, joined with her husband's nearness and the impossibility of at once approaching him, had driven Stephen Gambier from her mind; though its door was perhaps not yet closed to him as Silas was soon to close it.

There came a knock at last — a tapping of knuckles so diffident that the colour leapt to her face in response to the hope which rose in her heart.

"Silas!" she cried.

"May I come in?" he asked, in a voice of gentle entreaty.

She tore the door open and pulled him in, seizing his shoulders and kissing his face again and again on alternate sides.

"I fancied it was your step in the passage," she said. "And I felt quite sick when you passed the door."

So true was this that the speaker herself hardly felt the falsehood involved.

After he had explained how he came twenty-four hours ahead of his promise, there was a little pause while he looked at her — hesitating, it seemed.

"What is it, Silas?" she asked. "You look uneasy — apologetic — almost as if — as if you'd been doing something naughty. I've never seen you like that. Tell me."

"I nearly did something horrible," he replied. "Nobody knows — you needn't know. But I've got to tell you."

Eugenia smiled on him benevolently.

"If no harm has been done, Silas dear, and if it distresses you to talk of it, don't. When I've nearly done something rotten, but didn't, I say the goodness of not doing it balances the naughtiness of wanting to — and then I call it square and keep it to myself."

But he was not to be silenced. Her very magnanimity increased his impulse to get absolution for the wrong he believed he had done her. And Eugenia was glad. Her conscience already appeased not only by her safety but even more by her husband's evident absorption in herself, she was agog with curiosity to know what Clarissa had contrived.

"I've often told you," he began, "though I don't think you ever believed me, what a wicked temper I used to have — long ago."

"You've told me," she said. "But it's hard to believe it was worse than other people's — or even as bad as most."

"It's true. I've always been afraid it'd break out again. It did — this afternoon."

"What made it?" she asked in a small voice, feeling, in spite of her safety, awed by his face.

"I looked out of the window. I saw a woman, down there among the orange-trees — a woman in a man's arms."

"Well?" Eugenia's voice was still steady, but her colour faded.

"I was certain — it never crossed my mind that it could be anybody but you. I went there with the most awful rage in my heart, and found them. If Gambier hadn't said her name as I came tearing up, I believe I should have done murder — killed one or both of them."

"Them? Who?" cried Eugenia, knowing now well enough what Clarissa had done.

"Clarissa," he said, "and the man she loves."

"Loves!" repeated Eugenia, in immense astonishment.

"His arm was round her, and — well, there's no doubt about it."

Eugenia laughed; but the laugh came uneasily. Silas went on:

"He made a formal offer — at once."

"They haven't wasted much time," said Eugenia, laughing again, and more naturally.

"You had no idea, then, that this was going on?" asked Silas.

"Well," replied Eugenia, grown cautious and speaking reflectively, "I certainly did not think it had gone so far or so fast. But the funny thing is, Silas dear, that *you* don't seem a bit surprised."

"The other thing had got hold of me so — first the cruel pain and the jealousy and the murder that nearly came of it; and afterwards the immense relief and — and the horror of what I might have done," he explained, "that I seemed to have no feeling about anything else."

"Not even Clarissa?" asked his wife, coming close to him and slipping a hand through his arm.

He shook his head.

"There was nothing but you in the world," he said.

"Do you really love me like that, Silas?" she whispered.

Beltervane seized her passionately in his arms, crushing her so that she was hurt a little by something hard in the right pocket of his jacket.

"You don't know, Eugenia," he answered in a low voice, "how an old fellow like me can love."

Eugenia had a thought. When he had spoken of murder and killing, these had been words which he meant, no doubt, and felt, serving so far to convince her of his sincerity. But what was that in his pocket?

She writhed neatly from his arms, resting the fingers of her left hand on the edge of his right pocket.

"I do know," she said, and her hand, plunging and returning, displayed the automatic pistol. "Like this?"

Her gesture in handling the thing was designedly careless. When she felt his hand fall on her raised arm at the elbow and slide up it to the wrist, and then grasp the

wrist with a strength she had never felt in his fingers before, she knew the weapon was charged.

"Is it loaded?" she asked, with simulated horror, as he took it from her.

"Yes," said Silas, turning away from her in shame, as he carefully removed the clip.

"Loaded for me — me?" she continued, gazing at him with eyes he could not read.

"For you — you or Gambier," he answered.

Eugenia was fascinated by her peril, thrilled by the passion of the elderly husband she had thought callous.

"Do you care all that for me — care enough, I mean, to do a wicked thing, if I had been — been what you thought I was?" she asked, clinging to him and looking up in his face.

The ugly little weapon had done its killing after all. For Eugenia Beltervane, Stephen Gambier had ceased to exist.

Clarissa, meantime, had been dreading the dinner-hour. All the time she was dressing her mind was divided between the intense discomfort of the position into which she had forced herself, and the awkwardness of meeting Eugenia. Was it possible, she asked herself, that any woman could fail to be outraged by the annexation, even temporary and tactical, of the man for whom she had risked so much? And poor Clarissa had not yet found the opportunity, even if she had had the courage, to explain to Eugenia the terms of the annexation. It was even possible, she thought, that her own conduct might be misinterpreted. And, if she dreaded the meeting at dinner, still worse did she fear the moment when explanation must come in private. However persistently she assured herself that Eugenia was and must be held blameless, she was yet unable to conceive how the events of that afternoon could be discussed between them without imputing to her at least some degree of folly. Mr. Gambier, of course, was the sinner, Eugenia but the victim; but Clarissa, whose views in these

matters had the rigour of a more censorious age, held the opinion, often expressed to Eugenia, that victims were always either fools or wicked women, and generally both.

In spite of her bitterness against him, she obeyed Gambier in taking great pains with her toilet. She was the last to enter the drawing-room before dinner was announced, and beyond the fact that there was laughter among the other three which sounded happy and natural, she made no discovery before they were seated at table.

Then came her surprise — the shock of a cold douche. Eugenia was there, between her husband and her guest, facing her stepdaughter; and Eugenia shone, beamed and sparkled on everything and everybody. If you perceived and remarked upon the emerald ear-rings and the great emerald pendant on her neck, she seemed positively to coruscate with joy, life and beauty. Yet Clarissa could not believe that Eugenia was in the soul of her anything but merely and narrowly miserable. The look and atmosphere — the colour of cheek and the black, velvety gleam of her eyes might deceive one who did not know what Clarissa knew; but the facts were there, and Clarissa was driven to believing Eugenia the greatest actress of an age where no actress is small.

Silas, too, looked happier than his daughter had ever before seen him — taller than usual, somehow, and too dignified to be called uxorious; too harmoniously grey, in spite of black cloth and white shirt, to be anything but symphonic; and Stephen Gambier, as well as Silas Beltervane, hung upon Eugenia's lips, her vitality so invading them that they mistook it for the wit that was not in her. For she was gay, jolly, ready and affectionate to each in turn of the three, just because, and only because she was happy.

Clarissa watched her, and praised sadly the fine acting of a part poor at the best.

Stephen Gambier watched, and wondered what had happened since those pretty arms were round his neck with so embarrassing a hold; and if he did not at once divine

what he was ultimately to learn, he knew at least that they would never hold him, willing or unwilling, again.

This put him naturally in the best of humours; half the battle was won. And he paid his company for his relief with the best his tongue could give.

Silas let his satisfaction overflow upon Clarissa in gentle words and fatherly glances, so that the rather lonely and very uncomfortable heart was warmed upon one facet at least.

And she needed the signs of love the more, that, having hoisted herself into the unclean seat of the liar, she could not ask for sympathy.

Who was there, indeed, to sympathise? Eugenia was more likely to feel a jealousy the worse for its forced repression—at least until there had been that explanation which Clarissa would have given anything to avoid. And the only other in the world who knew was Gambier, and he, she reflected, did not—could not know how she hated Stephen Gambier; wherefore even Stephen Gambier's sympathy, if it at all existed, must be a lame thing.

Once during dinner Eugenia made a remark which assumed an understanding between him and Clarissa; and the colour which rushed to the girl's face was ascribed by her father to modesty and, perhaps, doubt of his approval; by Eugenia to a feeling for the man which she had not hitherto suspected; but by Gambier himself to its true causes—anger and disgust.

Left alone with his host, Stephen apologised for his precipitancy, spoke warmly of his admiration for Clarissa, stated his financial position and professional prospects, and repeated the request he had made in the garden.

Silas was in a mood to grant anything to anybody; he had never contemplated interfering with Clarissa's choice of a husband, and in the present case, as he said very courteously, he would have been hard put to it to find a single objection. It was perhaps the shortness of his own acquaintance with Mr. Gambier, he explained, which made him feel that his daughter had scarcely known Mr. Gam-

bier long enough to justify so important a decision. It had, however, been made.

But here Stephen interrupted him.

"I do not know whether it is any excuse, sir," he said, "but I must tell you that I had no intention whatever of speaking to Miss Beltervane before your return. It is difficult to explain, but ——"

"There are moments in our lives, my dear Gambier," said Silas, in his turn interrupting, and speaking with a warmth which lightened the sententiousness, "to describe which would be sacrilege. I can understand as well as another man — better than any young man to whom it has happened for the first time — how even the most cautious and punctilious of us may be swept off his feet. I will just say that my girl is your excuse, and leave it to her and you to decide whether this shall be at once a declared engagement, or whether you will stay on with us till you and she know each other better before telling the world. Take her for a long walk to-morrow, and talk it over."

Meantime Eugenia had no thought, it seemed, for anything but Silas's return and Silas's emeralds. The new jewels served them well, for each woman was determined to keep the other off the one subject that filled both minds. In a hundred small ways Eugenia showed her affection; Clarissa's shone from her face and from her eyes, as clear to read as ever. But both were glad when the men broke in.

Somehow Clarissa got through that evening. Just when she was counting the minutes till she might decently get away to bed, Gambier approached her. Silas was leaning over the piano, talking to his wife, who had sung the last notes of the Spanish song he was never tired of demanding.

"Please come outside with me," said Stephen. "The moon is splendid." Then, in a lower tone: "I want you to help me keep up appearances. Just three minutes. We can talk politics, if you like. I can see you want to get away, and it'll be easier for you, if — if we're supposed to have had a few words in confidence."

She followed him out upon the terrace, and he noted how the moonlight suited the coldness of her face and the severe grace of her figure.

"It is kind of you to help me," she said. "But I think the most difficult tangle of politics would seem simpler to me to-night than my own perplexities."

"To-night they are not going to be mentioned. If you can," said Gambier, "put them out of your head. But I am expected to ask you to walk with me to-morrow. Will you? We could get right away from everybody, and have a magnificent quarrel, with nobody the wiser."

"I hate quarrelling," said Clarissa, smiling faintly.

"So do I," replied Stephen; and asked her if she knew a certain member of Parliament — a peace-at-any-price politician, notorious for his quarrelsome temper. The first anecdote which he fastened upon this celebrity made her smile, and when the three minutes had stretched to nearly ten, he took her back to the drawing-room laughing.

"You've been very kind," she said, looking across at Eugenia playing softly, and her father with eyes and ears for nothing on earth but his wife; "but ——" and there stopped.

"But you are not quite sure whether it is right to let yourself be even amused by a person of whom you so deeply disapprove? Is that it?"

Eugenia turned a glowing face towards them.

"What are you laughing at, Clarissa?" she asked. "Was it the one about Bernard Flannery and his socks?"

CHAPTER X

FROM SEVENS TO SIXES

DRESSING for dinner, Stephen Gambier had mildly damned the gang of women that had put him in a hole so uncomfortable. To an angry man, two women seem a regiment.

It would not, perhaps, hurt him much to be for three weeks nominally engaged to marry a good-looking and wealthy young woman; but neither would it do him any good, and certainly it was a bore.

But Stephen Gambier, getting himself to bed, had a curious, intangible sense of triumph achieved. In vain he chased it, until, in bed, and dreaming before sleep had fixed its final hold on him, he had a vision of Flannery's striped socks, and woke laughing.

The socks were bad, the anecdote about them stale; but Clarissa's almost babyish laughter over them was a victory.

It was not until the morning that he gave serious thought to the behaviour of the other woman. Had he ever seen Beltervane and his wife together before that dinner, he could have judged better the state of Eugenia's mind. But, even as it was, he began to think that what he had seen that evening was much nearer the truth than the events of the afternoon would by themselves justify him in believing. Something, he conjectured, had happened to cause reaction or revulsion, and congratulated himself on this simplification of the tangle. If fate, moreover, must force upon him the unsought company of a strange woman, he much preferred Clarissa's. So he came to breakfast with his right arm still absurdly limp and helpless, but thrust at last decently through shirt and coat-sleeves, in a pleasant frame of mind not without its indefinite expectancy.

The day being fine, the meal was served on the terrace. As Gambier came out through the dining-room, Eugenia sailed up the steps from the garden. She wore an exquisite morning gown, whose texture and lines breathed coolness; her head, protected from the sun only by a Japanese umbrella, was carried with a kind of happy pride, and she looked, Stephen told himself, five years younger than twenty-four hours ago.

His first feeling was fear that she would speak of yesterday. But she saw at once the arm sleeved instead of suspended in sling and bandages; her colour rose with the pleasure of his recovery, and she came towards him with her hand out.

When he held out his left, she beamed at him.

"Bad habits!" she said. "You ought to give me the right now. I'm so glad."

"My right arm is clothed," he replied, "but hardly at one with my mind. It won't do anything I tell it; feels paralysed. You may shake it, but it can't shake yours. Ambrose said it'd be like that."

Without a shade of self-consciousness in face or bearing, Eugenia lifted the helpless hand and pressed it firmly. "It's first shake," she said, "by the one that owes it most. And I don't believe you've ever had 'thank you' said — not at all properly."

"You make too much of it, Mrs. Beltervane," said Stephen gently.

"Oh, but fancy, if you had missed me!" exclaimed Eugenia. For a moment she covered her face with her hands, and he knew she was thinking no longer of him, but of her own pretty features. So he thanked God for the value woman sets on her beauty.

When Clarissa and her father joined them, Gambier was sure that Eugenia, whether postponing or foregoing explanation, was utterly genuine in the expression of both her happiness and her friendship.

At breakfast his arm, slowly recovering from its numbness, though the hand was still unable to handle a knife

effectively, was used by both Beltervane and his wife to bring the subject of her rescue once more into discussion. Clarissa, in conscientious effort not to be left out of the conversation, maintained that Eugenia had run the greater risk in throwing herself out of the car, and then, wishing to include Gambier, whom she had scarcely addressed since she wished him good morning,

"Don't you think," she asked, "that it's always safer to sit still?"

"Your chauffeur showed me yesterday," he replied, "the place, where, he is convinced, the rear hind wheel of the car actually was for the fraction of a second, over the edge of the road. From the marks still left, I think he is right. And it's quite impossible to say how much extra weight at that moment would have been needed to cause a catastrophe."

This detail of the car's danger brought Eugenia's home to Clarissa with a new reality. She looked across the table at the pretty face smiling at her, and wanted to go round and kiss it, in gratitude for its escape. Restraining herself, she remembered the proper direction of her thanks. The suitable things had, no doubt, been said, when she was introduced to the man. But she felt now that her bearing had been cold.

"I do think it was awfully clever of you to catch her like that," she said, turning to him. And Gambier saw how her eyes smiled, though the delicate curves of the mouth kept their grave lines. "How did you manage to keep her from being even bruised?"

Eugenia laughed.

"Between seeing Mrs. Beltervane standing up in the car, and waking up in the night here with my man and Dr. Ambrose leaning over me, I don't remember anything about it," replied Stephen.

"He gave me an awful hug, and went over like a nine-pin," chuckled Eugenia, "and the next thing I knew was a mouthful of dust." Then, with a change to gravity, "but I thought he was dead," she added.

Silas took it up, but Clarissa did not listen closely to her father. Here, she reflected, was much excuse for Eugenia; but she would admit none for the wickedness of the man. Her youth and habit of mind both told her that where things are so wrong as in this house for the last ten days, someone is to blame. "It shall not be Eugenia," said her heart. "Therefore," added the obedient head, "it must be the man."

Something in her, nevertheless, being a little uneasy over this corrupt judgment, she resolved to do him full justice in every other way; and even, she fancied, felt her heart warm to him a little whenever she thought of his lame arm or his cut forehead.

As they rose from the table,

"You asked me to go for a walk this afternoon, Mr. Gambier," she said. "If you feel strong enough, I should like it."

"I feel perfectly well, and very keen for a walk," he replied.

"Then I'll be ready in half an hour. I don't think it'll be too hot. Won't the arm trouble you?"

He showed her how he could raise it a little from his side, close the fingers and flex the elbow. She seemed more concerned, however, with its weakness than impressed by its recovery; so that he had to explain to her how trifling an injury in itself is a broken collar-bone, yet how annoying in its inconvenience; and how it was his previous ill-health and the blow he had received on the head which made Ambrose confine him for so many days to his room.

At half-past two they started out together, and Clarissa, determined to be pleasant, began by asking of the illness which had brought him to the Riviera. From this they soon got to politics, in which she was surprised to find that he had still the power to interest her, and could, when she asked him for the other side of some vexed matter of the hour, put a case for his opponents with liberality and concision.

They both walked well, and, much of their path being

in the shade, did not suffer from the heat. For the first hour everything promised an afternoon more pleasant for both than either had expected. Not a word was spoken of Eugenia, nor of the events of the day before. Clarissa found herself accepting him as a clever and rather interesting man, who, in spite of recent illness, walked with a comfortable swing and endured a situation of extreme discomfort with excellent temper.

In the girl's company Gambier himself almost forgot the absurd relation which had been forced upon him. For he not only found her intelligent beyond the average, but perceived in her, whatever the matter of their discussion, a bias towards the imaginative and the spiritual which pleased his taste and aroused his interest.

At the end of that first hour, however, Clarissa had reached the point which she had made the object of the walk—a little glade of chestnuts on a neck between two of the lower hill-tops, opening out on the west side to a sweeping prospect of the coast. Here they sat down, and here the fatal silence fell between them.

To Clarissa, whose one purpose had been to keep tongues going until she was home again, there seemed suddenly to be no subject which had not been exhausted already.

Stephen felt comfortable, and took a long time filling his pipe. Clarissa had expected a new lead from him, and it did not come.

She got out some small remarks on the place, the view and the weather.

"Heavenly!" said the man; said it as if, indeed, he meant it, but also as if he meant to say no more.

The tension of the last half-hour had left her nervous—possibly irritable. In the silence she could not resist the invasion of things and thoughts marked forbidden. They crowded upon her, self-multiplying.

And still the man smoked, looking out over the blue; with a glance, rhythmically repeated, at the face whose placid purity of line and expression was broken now by a perpendicular furrow of vexation between the brows.

The damage to her serenity interested Stephen Gambier as much as the damaged delighted him. Since he was thus tied to the young woman, he did not see, being by no means old himself, why he should not pursue his interest.

"Don't you think," he said at last, "that it's your turn, Miss Beltervane?"

"For what?" she asked, trying to smile, and failing.

"To drip some oil on the waves," he replied. "The billows will heave, but the oil keeps them from breaking."

Clarissa thought he put it so well that she nodded, but did not speak.

"But your oil-can's empty? Well, now, may I speak plainly for a moment about the things that are bound to worry us for a few days, but which we needn't speak about very often?"

"Yes," she answered, just audible.

"We've got to be nice to each other for a while," he went on, "and you don't feel like being nice to me, do you?"

She said "No," in the same voice as her yes.

"I don't blame you for thinking me a bad sort of person. But I have really a very good brand of company manners. If we could make an arrangement to behave before Mr. and Mrs. Beltervane as much as possible like a couple engaged to be married, and, when we are alone, like a sensible pair of men thrown together by circumstance—the ship—the country inn—the desert island of the story-books—men that give and take, regard some subjects as taboo, and talk or not talk as they feel inclined on all others—why, then, I believe, we should get through it very well. The net result, when we are free again, would be that I should have had a very good time—because, you see, I don't think ill of you—and you would have had a time much less bad than you expected, because at the end you will find that you have got out of the way of thinking all the while about my badness."

Clarissa took her breath twice before she found enough

to begin her answer. The man frightened her a little, and there was a quality in him which made him interesting as an enemy: he made you wish to get to close quarters. You knew he would cry "*Touché*" to a good hit; and he had a horrid, but rather noble way of giving full credit to his adversary. This at first she had thought the mere changeable partiality of the advocate, rather than the impartiality of the judge. Anyhow, it gave a sense of clean fighting, even if he did always hit you hardest just after the most generous admission. The game, moreover, took on an interest of its own, entirely apart from the necessity of winning.

She would be as honest as he seemed. She told him so in those words, and he smiled.

"I like the way you speak very much, Mr. Gambier," she continued. "But it makes me speak in a way I'm afraid you will think very bad form indeed."

"When people get down to raw facts," he replied, "it's refreshing to throw form aside. I mean," he added in explanation, "that the rule then is simplicity of intention."

"Very well. I mean that it's just possible to behave, perhaps even to feel like decent friends for half an hour at a time, if the times aren't too many. But when people think, or pretend to think that you and I are pining for each other's company every hour of the day, and when the days have got to be — oh, I don't know! — but a great many more than it's pleasant to think of — why, then, subjects like Mr. Jordan's knowledge of ecclesiastical history, Mr. Kirknoll's ideal of party loyalty, Tolstoi's dogmatic beliefs and the morals of Tammany Hall will get threadbare very soon. It's like using fine handkerchiefs to scrub the floor. They weren't meant for it. If you and I came to be here together in a nicer and more commonplace way, I can quite believe even Mrs. Tankfield might go on being interesting to talk about. But ——"

The girl paused a moment, hunting for an image to convey her thought.

"You called it oil — this pretence of interest in each

other, apart from that horrid curiosity of enmity that we pretend—that we wish to hide.”

“I haven’t an atom of enmity for you,” said Stephen bluntly.

“I have more than I can express against you, Mr. Gambier,” retorted Clarissa, with a cold simplicity which hurt the man so much that he was vexed with himself that he could be so hurt.

“What is it based on?” he asked.

“I will tell you,” said Clarissa, “when I have said what I wanted to say about our pretence. I’ve read somewhere that oil, used to calm the waves, makes a fine, fine skin over the water that keeps the rough edges from breaking out; so, though you don’t stop the waves, you get rid of the breakers. Now our oil is a skin of bad quality. The mere effort to be truthful is making my rough edges break through now.”

She laughed with a gentle kind of bitterness.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” she said, “if we were to have a horrible row in a minute.”

“No,” said Gambier. “I make the wind. I refuse to blow.”

His interpolation acted as she felt each new attempt at kindness was bound to act, exasperating her rebellion against the artificial friendship.

“You don’t *make* the wind,” she said. “You *are* it. Your wisdom, your fame, your courage and your kindness, combined with other things, make you the wind. The effect must be a storm, and I—I can’t do this kind of thing, when I know what you are. I feel like a liar. I hate myself.”

“And you hate me,” suggested Gambier.

Clarissa nodded.

“If your hate and your enmity are one,” said Gambier, “it is time to tell me what they are based upon.”

Clarissa shook her head; her lips were set tight, as if refusing escape to terrible things.

“I think you must,” he persisted. “It isn’t only that

you promised to do so, a few minutes ago. But you have gone so far that I am sure we should both be happier if you went to the end."

Still she was silent.

"It's not kind, Miss Beltervane, to tell a man you hate him, and not tell him why."

"I don't want to be kind," said Clarissa pettishly.

"I think you do," said Stephen. "And more still—you want to be just. You wouldn't really dislike me if it weren't for these sins of mine that you will not name. Well, you ought to give me a chance."

"You have done a great service to my father—and to his wife. I am sure they are right when they say it was a wonderfully brave and clever thing to do. You are nursed in their house, and, while the man who owes you gratitude is away, and the woman whose gratitude is too strong for her good sense is with you all day long, you take advantage of the position to make love to her. You did it, I suppose, merely to pass the time—didn't think any harm would result. But it was base and horrid—and I can't be—be on any terms with you at all."

"It's Mrs. Beltervane and your father that we've got to think of, you know," said Stephen.

Her wrong-headedness was of circumstance, her rightness of mind her own. The harder she hit him, the better he liked her; and felt a sort of absurd desire to tell her so.

"And how do you know," he asked, "that I did make love—those are your words—to Mrs. Beltervane?"

"I saw you from the watch-tower—saw you," said Clarissa, in a tone of deep disgust, "with your arms round her."

Stephen passed his left hand over his still helpless right elbow, and looked up at her comically.

"Oh, one arm, then," said Clarissa irritably. Then she softened a little. "Have you—oh! do say if you have any reason, any explanation to give, Mr. Gambier. You have

made me talk, made me say the things that are boiling in me. You mustn't be angry if they're horrid."

"I'm not angry," replied Gambier, rash in his admiration. "I think you are doing just right. I think more than that."

What the *more* was she wished to know, but would not ask—merely waiting a moment before she resumed her indictment.

"I saw it all. I saw you there. I saw my father see it. It's horrible to admit such things to you, Mr. Gambier, even though you know them already. And it's simply disgusting to remember the thing I was obliged to do."

There was a pause, and they could hear the wind sighing in the chestnuts.

"Wasn't I obliged?" asked Clarissa at last. "What else could I do?"

"Why do you ask me?" said Stephen.

"Because you're wise, if you aren't good. I mean, you know what goodness is."

"I do," he replied. "I think what you did was both good and wise."

"And you have nothing to say about what you did—nothing that—that explains or excuses you? I don't want to feel your enemy. I don't want to be cross and unfriendly. Isn't there anything that makes it different from what it looks like?"

She was pleading with him—almost saying: "Invent an excuse, even, and I'll try to believe it." He had to stiffen himself before he answered.

"It is for you to interpret what you saw—or what you think you saw," he said. "I have nothing to say."

"What interpretation did my father put upon what he saw?" asked Clarissa, almost fiercely.

"I can only conjecture," answered Stephen.

He spoke with a reserve so awkward that she thought him insincere.

"His opinion," she said, with sarcasm, "was shining in

his hand. When we had lied to him, he was ashamed, and hid his opinion in his pocket. Of course my opinion is what his was, unless you can give me a better."

"I have nothing to say," Stephen repeated.

Clarissa rose wearily.

"Hadn't we better be getting home?" she asked.

On the way, when the path was wide enough for walking abreast, Gambier made his attempts to reopen conversation, and the girl would reply in monosyllables. Within half a mile of Les Nuages, he tried once more, and Clarissa stopped to face him.

"I know, Mr. Gambier, that we shall have to go on play-acting for some time. It is kind of you to take so much trouble to make the farce consistent. But I think I shall play my part best if we keep our make-believe for an audience."

He held his tongue until they were in sight of the *château*. Then,

"I don't want you to be oppressed, Miss Beltervane," he said, "by an exaggerated idea of the length of the piece. To-morrow or the next day, I shall get a very peremptory summons to town. . . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Gambier," she said; and they did not meet again until five minutes before dinner.

That evening the girl's acting was so unconvincing that Gambier became uncomfortable, and even began to wonder whether it was required of him further to make a fool of himself by assuming the chastened air of the lover in disgrace.

Eugenia felt anxious, and Silas, having now some leisure from his own affairs to watch his daughter's, became seriously alarmed.

In the few minutes spent together by the two men after the women had retired, the engagement was not mentioned nor Clarissa's name once spoken. The girl seemed to have left behind her the constraint which she had created, and Stephen was uncomfortably conscious that it would not be long at this rate before explanations were demanded.

Later Silas made excuse to take his wife to his study.

"What's wrong between these young people?" he asked bluntly.

"Mr. Gambier seems quite all right, dear," she answered, sitting on the arm of his chair. "It's just Clarissa."

"What d'you mean? If a man can't get on with a girl like that ——" he began angrily.

Eugenia laughed.

"You never did understand the dear thing, Silas," she said; "not half as well as I do. You believe, because she and I get on together as two women very seldom do, that she is easygoing and readily adaptable to new people and new circumstances. That's just what she's not. She's probably feeling horribly awkward, thinking we're watching her and him and wondering how they'll suit each other. Every glance, every reference to the engagement makes her feel stiffer and stiffer. It's got to wear off, and the best way's to treat them as if they were just ordinary friends. She's probably being beastly to the poor man at this minute because she thinks you've carried me off to leave her alone with him."

"I don't believe the child's in love with him. She doesn't look a bit like it. He's eight years older than she is."

"And you are twenty older than me," cried Eugenia, with her arm round his neck. "Age has nothing to do with it."

"I'm going to ask her straight out — or him."

"It's not fair to embarrass the man, Silas, until you have positive reason for complaining. And you do owe him a good deal. At least," said Eugenia, with *calinerie*, "you said you did."

"I do," said Silas, with affectionate fervour.

"Well, leave him out at present. As for Clarissa, if you're really worried, let me speak to her."

It was so agreed. But in the meanwhile things had not gone well in the drawing-room. Conversation had been a failure, and Clarissa would have gone to bed, leaving Stephen comfortably alone, had he not objected.

"Surely you don't mind being left, Mr. Gambier," she had replied. "I'm awfully tired, and when I go and say good night to my father, they'll come and be civil."

"I can see you are tired, and I'm sorry," he answered. "And I can always get something out of my own company, Miss Beltervane. But do please remember that you did a thing brave to the point of rashness, and asked me to play up to you. I've been playing up as hard as I could. But you make the game terribly unreal, if you give them the idea that you hate the sight of me."

She smiled faintly, but full at him.

"You're quite right," she admitted. "All I said this afternoon I mean. But you have played the game better than I have. What shall we do to seem natural?"

"Do you play?" asked Stephen, looking at the piano, which stood open.

"Yes—in a sort of way. Not like Eugenia."

"Play, then, and I will——"

"Hang over me? Isn't that what they call it in the novels?"

She seated herself at the keyboard.

"All right," said Stephen, responding to her humour, acrid though it was. "You play, and I'll hang."

She looked round at him a little more freely.

"What shall I play?" she asked.

"Mendelssohn—*Songs without Words*," he answered; and was pleased to hear her softened laughter, as she led off with the *Moonlight Sonata*. Steadying to the music, she played with feeling, if with little power. And the man stood away from her, letting the moonlight of his boyhood soak back into him. Suddenly he remembered how and when Miriam Lemesurier had said to him: "A man like you loves music better the better he knows it."

At this moment, as if she had felt another woman invading the chamber of his thought, the girl turned to him a face quite changed from its recent indifference. Under influence of the music and a sudden little rollicking sense of fun by no means rare with her, but seldom expressed

in her features, it was become full of challenge and merri-ment.

"You're not hanging one bit," she said.

The look, brief as sudden, caught him. He believed in Pygmalion. But he merely said:

"When they come, I'll hang beautifully, and when they're quite close, you must do that again."

"Do what?"

"Look up at me — that very same glance."

"Very well," she said quietly.

"Give you three to one in anything you like you can't do it."

"Gloves?"

"Done," said Stephen. "Sixes?"

Clarissa nodded over the notes, and wondered how she could be so frivolous in the midst of horrid things.

Then they came, Silas and Eugenia.

Stephen "hung" admirably, but Clarissa outshone him in a glance perfectly timed and perfectly adorable. She played through it, and only when its full effect had struck her father and Eugenia did she stop in the middle of a bar, as if then first was she aware of their presence.

"The child's in love after all," said Silas to himself.

But,

"What an actress!" thought Eugenia. Aloud she said: "It's time you went to bed, Clarissa. Don't think me cruel, Mr. Gambier. But the child hasn't been sleeping well, and I've got to take care of her."

Stephen was amused, for he knew very well it was Clarissa who wielded usually this kind of control.

As he shook hands with her, he said, for all to hear:

"Sixes. Six buttons, and six pairs."

"Only three," she answered.

"Six," repeated Gambier. "You won twice over."

Silas, when at last he said good night to his guest, had arrived at the conclusion that these two young people were doing things in some new-fashioned way, carrying a preference for private over public manifestations of the emotions to a pitch quite pedantic.

CHAPTER XI

STEPHEN ACCORDING TO EUGENIA

ON the way to her room,

"I'm coming to yours, as soon as I'm boiled, Clarissa darling," cried Eugenia. "So hurry up, because I've lots to say, and you're going to get it hot."

Since Eugenia had become, with the passing of a day, the person with whom she most, instead of least, desired explicit conversation, and because, moreover, she loved Eugenia, Clarissa smiled, ran away and hurried even her own bath to get ahead of Eugenia's boiling.

Very fresh, pink and smiling she looked, in spite of her troubles, when Eugenia found her spread, night-gowned, long and graceful, outside her bed-clothes.

"You're really wonderfully beautiful, Clarissa," said the visitor, sinking into the chair provided, just at the best angle to the bed. "Or will be, if you ever grow up properly."

"Thank you, marm. What is it you want me to do that I oughtn't or won't?" asked the girl. "But that talk about growing up is the silliest sort of nonsense. Why, I am even now, on one side of me, miles and years and tons older than you'll ever be, if you live to a thousand."

"I speak of the body, child. Women are all body. If they begin to have souls, then they're angels or devils. Now — business!"

"Well?" asked Clarissa.

"What's it all about?"

"It's awfully difficult," said Clarissa, wriggling on the bed. "And it's rotten being scolded. After all, it's not my fault. I haven't made a fool of myself."

"My darling child," began Eugenia; but had to laugh,

and then get breath before she could go on. "You perfectly darling child and most delicious little ass! What price dinner? Of all the love-sick maidens I ever! you were certainly the most loveless, though you did look pretty sick."

"You can make fun without imitating Mrs. Cuyper, dear. And you must admit——"

Eugenia interrupted sharply.

"That the *Moonlight Sonata* was good business? Oh, yes, top-hole! But you can't keep it up for five minutes. My dear thing, I can't bear to see you going about worrying that over-bred conscience of yours. Listen to the wisdom and the confessions of a woman that isn't worthy to put your pretty shoes on for you, but loves you better than anyone else has ever had the opportunity of doing. I shall have to take a back seat even at that soon enough."

More than once of late had Clarissa wished she could feel angry with her stepmother. But, if this last could not do it, she knew nothing could.

"I am listening," she said, smiling with the meekness which, coming from the stronger, always flattered Eugenia.

"I know what you did for me. I know why you did it. I love you for doing it. And I don't like to see you spoil the thing you are doing for me any more than I like to see you ill-treat the man who is helping you out in the most sporting way any man ever helped anybody. You've got a grievance against poor Stephen Gambier."

"Of course I have!" cried Clarissa indignantly.

"What is it?"

"He—he—oh! don't, Eugenia! There are words and things it just sickens me to associate with you. Surely you understand well enough without my talking?"

"Talking's the one thing you're lazy about. You keep up a reputation for good sense by never letting your tongue give you away, you little humbug. This time talk you must. What has the distinguished criminal done?"

"You know."

"Of course I know. What you've got to tell me is what you've been telling him he's been doing."

"I can't, and I won't," said Clarissa.

"Why not?"

"I'm ashamed," said the girl, turning her eyes away.

"That's unkind," said Eugenia, flushing painfully. "Of course I was a fool, and of course I know it. You needn't rub it in."

In the short silence Clarissa put out a hand that found another.

"I suppose I've got to do the talking after all," Eugenia continued. "My notion is that Stephen has proposed playing at being friends until — well, long enough to tide over the ordeal."

Clarissa turned on the bed and stared at her with large eyes.

"How on earth d'you know that?" she asked.

Eugenia laughed joyously.

"No, dear, he didn't tell me. It's what he would do. And I imagine also that the attempt went rather well for half an hour, and then broke down on account of a fit of conscience hardly distinguishable from bad temper on the part of Miss Clarissa Beltervane. That right?"

"Ye-es. But it's rather a nasty way to put it — about me."

"The truth's a nasty, jagged weapon," said Eugenia. "And I'm certain Stephen wasn't ill-tempered."

"Oh, no," admitted Clarissa.

"Well, I rather fancy this fit of — of conscience ended in your telling the good man that you couldn't carry on the farce with one who'd trifled with the middle-aged affections of a sensitive, warm-hearted, feather-headed step-mother of the lofty Clarissa, and had made love to her under the lofty Clarissa's father's roof. Roofs and thresholds always come into this kind of sermon. And then ——"

"Oh, do stop it, Eugenia," cried the girl, with tears in her eyes.

"Isn't that what it comes to?"

"Something of that sort. But I didn't talk like a fool."

"You acted like one, if you told him that."

"He wouldn't deny it — wouldn't make the least — excuse, or give the smallest explanation."

"And you are the girl who began this debate by saying: '*I haven't made a fool of myself!*' Stephen Gambier explain! Stephen Gambier offer excuses! And if he would, how could he, you great baby, without giving me away? I like the picture! That man playing Adam's dirty game for the sake of establishing a reputation as Joseph! D'you know what you've been doing, child?"

Clarissa, beginning to understand, was speechless. In answer to the question, she shook her head.

"My folly and your cleverness got the man who saved my life into a horribly uncomfortable position. You have been making it as much worse for him as you possibly could, by treating him as if he were a criminal, unfit to enjoy even the loyal support that all men in the same boat or team show each other, even if they're personal enemies."

"But you ——" began Clarissa, and stopped.

"Oh, I see!" said Eugenia. "You must have chapter and verse. Well, here goes." And she lowered her voice and abandoned flippancy both of manner and diction. "My dear, before your father took me out of the shop, I'd never been in love with anybody. I did love him very much, but not so much as I love him now."

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Why more now? I'll tell you that after we've done with my sins. Well, for the last two or three years he has been away from me so much, and I've told myself so often that he wasn't and couldn't be getting tired of me, that of course at last I began to think he really was. Then I got him to bring me out here, and we were going to have the jolliest time together, when he rushed off to London again. Even though I had been nearly killed, and the man that had saved me was ill in the house, off he went. I was awfully sore, Clarissa — cross and cantankerous, I know — but really hurt, too. After he'd gone, I had nothing to do

but look after Mr. Gambier. I thought him awfully handsome, even when his face was covered with dust and blood, all for me, and he looked like a dead thing. When we found it wasn't so bad after all, I was — oh! I can't tell you how grateful — how glad I was. Then I used to read aloud to him. And I thought at first it'd be rather fun to have a flirtation. I felt somehow it'd be paying Silas back for being so horrid. Of course I found him impossible."

"Impossible? How?" asked Clarissa.

"Well, nothing made any difference. He just wouldn't. He was awfully nice, awfully interesting, courteously grateful, but you might just as well expect a Hottentot to play bridge as Stephen Gambier to philander."

Clarissa felt hot all over, remembering how she had used to him that very word.

"Instead of giving it up then, I got piqued, I suppose, and before I knew what a fool I was being, I was playing at a game quite different — just as if you'd sat down to play coon-can for love or counters, and found, when you'd been losing for a whole afternoon, that it'd really been for pretty high points. Don't look like that, Clarissa. I never was — was like that before, and I *know* it's the last time."

At this time of her life, such a confession from any other woman would have found Clarissa disgusted and probably censorious. From Eugenia it gave her the kind of distress one feels when a beloved child has repented of stolen sugar.

"You're just a baby, dear," she said, her gravity breaking into a smile.

"Well, then — that's all — except that, down there by the fountain I told him that Silas was coming home, and — oh! I can't! I was silly, and said things, and I felt sick and faint. And he put out his hand that wasn't hurt to steady me, and I flopped down on his shoulder and cried. That's all."

"But now?" asked Clarissa. And Eugenia went on without heeding the question.

"No, it isn't quite all. Just when you came tearing

down upon us, he was saying some awfully sensible things to me. He was neither silly nor prim — and — and never, never once, from beginning to end, has he said a thing or looked a thing that'd shock even you — and you're silly and prim enough for a regiment of governesses."

Clarissa smiled at the burst of petulance.

"You've told me so much, dear," she said, "that I think it would be kind to tell me how you feel now."

"If it wasn't for all this silly fuss and bother," replied Eugenia, "I should have forgotten all about it. I'm ashamed enough, really, without being catechised by a flapper like you, and I want to forget it."

"I can't understand," said Clarissa.

The waywardness and the flush of childish resentment dropped from the woman's face, leaving it more solemn than Clarissa had ever seen it before.

"My dear," said Eugenia softly, "I can't tell even you all about it. But your father came straight to me after he had left you in the garden with Stephen, and he told me how he had felt and the things he might have done — and — well, I understood him as I didn't think one could understand a man. And it's all right."

Clarissa remembered the thing which had hidden its dull-blue gleam in her father's pocket. She pulled Eugenia's face down to her own, and kissed her — once, for all she had told her; but a second time for what she had concealed.

After she had said good night, Eugenia turned again to the bedside.

"I wonder if I have the courage," she said doubtfully.

"For what?" asked the girl.

"If you think you can't keep it up, dear, I'll just tell Silas all about it. Perhaps he'd forgive me."

"No! No! I won't have him hurt," said Clarissa.

"And it would be awfully unfair now to Mr. Gambier. You said you wanted to forget it all; I believe you can. We'll do the rest."

Eugenia slept well. But Clarissa lay long awake.

She had made a fool of herself, and did not like it.

CHAPTER XII

CLARISSA PLAYS UP

ON the tray which bore his coffee and *brioche*, Stephen found a note enveloped and carefully sealed. The handwriting was a woman's, and for a moment he had fear of Eugenia. He liked her; he was sorry she had, for a space however brief, played the fool; but he did not want letters.

From the first words of the note he knew the maiden, not the wife, had written. There was restraint in every character of the script, and the words were very few.

"DEAR MR. GAMBIER,— Please do not get that telegram before we have spoken privately. I know what you wouldn't tell me.

"Sincerely yours,

"CLARISSA BELTERVANE."

At the mid-day breakfast she greeted him with a smile like the sunrise, and his heart sang inside him before he knew what it was singing about. Almost immediately afterwards, the poor girl blushed painfully. "With most women," he said to himself, "the shame of injustice, if they could feel it, would have come first, the welcome back to favour afterwards."

They had not been long at table when,

"I've been for a walk," said Clarissa.

"How far?" asked Silas.

"Hardly four miles, out and back. Just enough to give me appetite for a real tramp," replied Clarissa, and turned to Gambier; "if Stephen is game," she added; and Stephen alone felt what the "Stephen" cost her. He took it as a symbol of reparation.

Clarissa was afraid that her father, or Eugenia in a mood careless or mischievous, would remark upon the new familiarity, and added hastily: "I went by the cottage of that odd person they call the Hermit."

"Major Evans, d'you mean?" asked her father. "I hope he didn't pounce out upon you and try to save your soul."

So she told them of the time — the afternoon of the day her father had come home — when he had at least opened the subject of souls, and of how she had told him hers was a matter too private to discuss with a stranger.

"Did you see him this morning?" asked Silas.

"Only his back," said Clarissa. "There are two windows, at right angles to each other, in his front room, so that you can see through the front one and get the light from the side one on the person inside. He had his back towards me, and stood fixed, looking at something on the wall opposite the window."

"What was it?" asked Eugenia.

"I don't know," she replied. "I wasn't prying, you know. I only had a glance as I went by, and he was in the way. But I got a dull, goldy sort of gleam, like a picture-frame, on both sides of his figure, and I thought he was looking at a picture — a big one. What d'you know about Major Evans, father? It's not a Scotch name, is it?"

"Welsh, I should think," said Silas.

"He talks Scotchly, when he gets excited. And when I asked him his name, his answer was odd — like trying to keep inside the letter of the truth. 'You may call me Evans — I used to be in the army,' he said. It made me think Evans wasn't his name, and that he put it like that to save himself from lying."

"To pass by a *nom de guerre* is hardly falsehood — not necessarily, Clarissa."

"I suppose it isn't," answered the girl. "But I felt he was half afraid it was."

Stephen was pleased by the new life in her, belying the dark shadow of bad sleep under her eyes.

"Will you take me that way some time," he asked, "to call on your hermit?"

"Not to-day," she answered. "I'm going to take you somewhere else, if you'll come."

The little note of possession amused him. He consented, with an eagerness quite in tune, to go anywhere she pleased, and when she pleased.

The meal was near its end when a telegram was brought him. Clarissa glanced at him anxiously while he read it. She knew that he had been in her father's telephone-cabinet before dinner last night, and suspected him of having telephoned a telegraphic message to London, and this of being the answer.

Stephen looked at Silas.

"From Gateside," he said. "That poor Milroy's ill again — dying, they think. They want me to be ready at a moment's notice."

"I hope that doesn't mean you're leaving us?" said Silas.

"He's on the wrong side, Silas," cried Eugenia. "We won't let him go. We'll get up another accident, or poison him — just a little, to keep him. Besides there's something positively ghoulish about the way you politicians hang round your enemies' death-beds."

"I quite agree with that," said Stephen. "I'm certainly not going to rush off to Gateside, as long as poor Milroy's alive and holds the seat. But you see, if he gets better, it's almost certain he won't be strong for a long time. He'll resign office at least, if not take the Hundreds. It means probably two by-elections. I shouldn't wonder if they'll ask me to oppose the man who takes the office. They're certain to appoint someone with an unbreakable majority, and our people may fancy me able to give it a shake. But I'd rather stick to Gateside."

"Why?" asked Clarissa.

"Because I'm going to carry it next time," said Stephen.

"Do you really want very much to be in Parliament?" she asked.

"I want very much to do my share — if your father will

pardon me—in pulling down the Government's majority."

"Then it isn't only a sort of game for you," said Clarissa, speaking low to him, while her father turned to Eugenia. "I mean, do you really think there are things in politics that matter and make a difference?"

"Of course I do," he answered. "Why d'you ask?"

"Only that—because—well," said Clarissa, "sometimes at home we see a lot of political people, and most of them give me a feeling that they don't really care about or believe anything."

"It's hardly fair to judge people by their drawing-room chatter, is it?" he replied. "A man's knowledge of how much he wants to see done, and how little of it will ever get done in his time makes him sound cynical sometimes."

At the time appointed, he found her waiting for him, dressed in white flannel, with a pretty hat of white straw; smiling and altogether promising him a better afternoon than yesterday's. She carried a walking stick and a little basket.

"Eugenia and my father have gone to Villefranche," she said, "so we needn't go back till dinner-time."

"What's in the basket?" asked Stephen.

"Tea and lots of things," she answered. "Don't be frightened. I'm going to be ever so nice to-day, and you shall be free to get up and walk off straight home, if I say one horrid thing."

They were going fast on a track at present smooth and well made. He had taken the basket, and, after a few hundred yards in silence, she saw that he carried it in his right hand.

"Doesn't it hurt the poor arm?" she asked.

"Didn't you notice how well I used my knife at breakfast? Picked my chicken-bones as clear as old ivory," he answered. "It was the walk yesterday. And last night and this morning I exercised the arm well. I thought, you know, that I was going to travel to-day or to-morrow, and I hate having to be helped with everything."

Poor Clarissa turned very pink all over her face, and felt very hot. With an effort she plunged into what she had been longing and yet dreading to say ever since Eugenia had bidden her good night.

"Mr. Gambier," she said, beginning rather breathlessly, "I talked for hours last night to my stepmother. She is a dear. I wonder if you know that I am — am devoted to her."

"I found that out, Miss Beltervane," he replied, "before I ever saw you. If you won't think me intrusive, I should like to tell you that it has been chiefly my admiration of your relation to each other that has made me so very anxious to carry our innocent plot to success."

"Thank you," she answered sweetly. "Some day I shall tell you how good she was to me when I was a child. I think she's just the most charming person in the world, and I *expect* people, I believe, to fall in love with her at first sight. I'm sometimes angry with them because they don't. And — it's rather difficult to say — but, somehow, since I grew up, I've got into a way — of being —"

"A kind of elder sister to her?" suggested Gambier.

Clarissa nodded. "Yes — at least, it feels like that sometimes. And I get furious with anybody that I think has been unkind to her. I was awfully angry with you, and I behaved very badly, and really, Mr. Gambier, I'm as sorry about it as can be. It's her doing that I'm ashamed of myself. She guessed how I had been going on, and gave me an awful scolding. And she told me how perfectly wise and kind you had been all the time. There's a great deal of what she said that I should like you to know, only it might be giving her away to repeat it all."

"It's better to say too little than too much," said Stephen.

"But I don't want you to think ill of her," said Clarissa.

"I don't. For the last week I fancy I've understood her better than you have. I haven't seen her alone once since your father came, but this is what has happened; tell me if I'm right: the dear little lady was in a state of pique

when your father left me here knocked silly, and went to London."

"He had to go," said Clarissa.

"Yes. And she was angry. Her very kindness to me gave her a sort of innocent fondness for the helpless log of a man she was nursing. She made a little romance of what she called my saving her life. Her loneliness, perhaps a little older than the matter of the Hawkin's Clip, made her imagine this feeling to be some sort of offence against her duty, and when she heard rather suddenly of your father's return, she was upset and made a little scene — just as some children will get frightened by the bogies of their own games. Well, all that has been wiped out by something — I have to conjecture what it was — something which happened while you and I were down by the fountain, trying to sketch a plan of campaign."

"You're rather uncanny, Mr. Gambier. How could you guess so near the truth?"

"Do you remember," asked Stephen, "how brilliant she looked, how happy and how utterly in love with your father she seemed, at dinner, not an hour later?"

"Oh, yes," said Clarissa. "I thought ——"

"You thought, I fancy, that Mrs. Beltervane was playing a part — and acting magnificently. For a moment I nearly fell into the same mistake. Then I saw she wasn't acting, but living. She was a different woman. She was inspired, not by an old idea, but a new one. You must remember that I'd seen a good deal of Mrs. Beltervane, even before you came out."

"Oh, yes," said Clarissa. She was grateful to him for the delicate picture he made of the whole affair.

"Something had happened," he went on, "and her husband was a different man for her. She had always loved him; but this had the excitement of a brand new love affair. She had forgotten she'd been silly; she'd forgotten I existed; she was ready, but checked herself, to be pleasantly facetious, in the orthodox manner, about our wonderful betrothal."

He chuckled softly — at his last word, Clarissa thought. Now the laughter was entirely in good taste; and therefore Clarissa wondered why she could not laugh herself. She covered her lack of response with a question.

"What did you think had happened, Mr. Gambier?"

"You probably know what happened," he replied.

"I haven't been told," she answered.

"Well, you remember, when your father came on us there, by the fountain, that I said your Christian name rather loud?"

"Oh, yes," said Clarissa, stiffly.

"I had seen something in his hand. I waved him the first danger signal I could think of."

"I saw," said Clarissa, "and I understood that Eugenia's wasn't the only life you had saved."

"Somehow or other, I think, Mrs. Beltervane must have learned that he'd been ready and able to kill. It isn't much to discover that an apache or a hooligan is ready with his gun. But when a pretty woman of the world finds that a dear, good, kind, elderly husband picks up the nearest weapon and is ready to use it because he thinks his love is being invaded, she not only, perhaps, enjoys the thrill of getting back to first principles, but believes in the man ever after as a potential hero."

Clarissa looked at him, wondering.

"I have ventured to tell you my theory," said Stephen, "on the chance of saving you the trouble of deciding how much fact you should tell me."

"Thank you," said the girl, her face very white. "It has saved me all the trouble. Love must be a queer thing," she added, "to make people do things like that."

"I think, in these matters, that your father and Mrs. Beltervane are much like a pair of children. Love has come easy, till this thing happened. Children are elemental — savages — not angels, whatever the poets may say. The dear savagery in this case, which I put as a mere theory, seized one and convinced the other. I prophesy, Miss Bel-

tervane, that they are going to owe a great deal to your wisdom in doing what you did."

"It wasn't wisdom," objected Clarissa. "Just impulse — instinct."

"It was devotion. And now — that's all, isn't it?"

"That's all," said Clarissa. "Except that I'm sorry I misjudged you, and was so ill-mannered."

Stephen felt pity for candour, youth and delicacy forced into this position.

"Will you shake hands?" he asked.

Clarissa nodded and gave him her hand. Just for a moment her lip trembled; but Gambier deceived her into thinking he had not seen.

After a minute's steady walking,

"The comedy runs smoother now, doesn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Clarissa. "It's pleasanter to be friendly — if we must tell lies in company."

"There's a way out of the moral difficulty," said Gambier; and immediately regretted a saying prompted by feeling rather than intent.

"I don't see any," said Clarissa simply.

"Don't you? Well, then," he replied, "I'm prepared to tell any number of fibs to keep the friendship."

"After a time, I hope we shall be able to keep it, without telling stories at all," said Clarissa cheerfully.

"Shall we?" asked Stephen, foreseeing obstacles. He did not think the time had come, however, for enlarging on them, and they were soon talking of other things. She discovered that her companion had been reading of and visiting the Roman remains of the coast. But even Stephen Gambier's amusing archæology brought them back to Clarissa Beltervane's anxieties. He was telling her of the ancient Olivula, which he said was a Roman Eastbourne, and she was interested and amused until she asked him exactly where Olivula had stood.

"On the Villefranche roadstead," he answered, "opposite the old arsenal."

"Villefranche," said Clarissa. "That's where my father and Eugenia have gone to-day." That was the end of Roman remains, for she immediately proceeded to ask, did he know a Mrs. Templeton Cuyper.

Gambier did not know her, and, perceiving a certain anxiety on the girl's face, requested information.

"She's American," said Clarissa. "She has a house in Berkeley Square, she's rather jolly and rather absurd, and her yacht's in Villefranche Harbour now."

"Yes?" said Stephen. "Does that distress you?"

"I'm only wondering whether we shall find, when we get home, that father's gone and brought them all up to dine and stay the night. It'd be just like him, and ——"

"I see," said Stephen, with a gravity he did not feel. "The question is, how do we stand in the eyes of the world — engaged or not engaged."

"It would have been easy enough, if I'd spoken to Eugenia before she started — told her we didn't want it announced."

"Anyhow, I should think she'd hold her tongue till she'd asked you," suggested Stephen.

"Yes. But you never can tell what father will do. I believe he was awfully worried about us, while I was — was being horrid. But this morning, Eugenia says, he thinks us a great success. Isn't it awkward?"

"We've only got to behave like ordinary sensible people, and keep our eyes open. You'll soon find out what's been said."

"Yes — of course," said Clarissa. "Only I ought to have prevented their saying anything at all. Why on earth didn't I think of speaking to Eugenia?"

"I suppose," said Stephen, "that you were thinking of something else."

"I was — of telling you how sorry I was," she replied, simply as a child. "You see, if it's going to be broken off so soon ——"

"I do see," said Stephen. "Let's just hope for the best, and not spoil what was going to be a jolly afternoon."

The afternoon was not spoiled, but was jollier even than its promise.

A soprano laugh is often shrill. Clarissa's was extraordinarily soft, clear and musical, but difficult to excite. Stephen Gambier, still holding himself safe from the young woman herself, fell that afternoon frankly in love with the sound of her merriment.

Granted memory and an average sense of humour, no profession gives a man better store of anecdote than his; and, having twice made the girl's silvery peal ring out over the hill-sides, he set himself to choosing from his stock and introducing with pertinence everything which might give him a repetition of this new pleasure. Then he would grow serious, resting her throat for a while, before sending her off again.

They were out many hours, but the miles they walked were few. They crossed the Gorbio's narrow trickle of water on stepping-stones; and high up the Borigo, where, but for some deep, clear pools, the torrent-bed was dry, she unwrapped the napkin in her basket and brought out a thermos flask full of tea and a fat bundle of sandwiches.

She had brought him here, she said, because she so loved the wonderful aquamarine colour of the water in these three deep holes in the rock.

She took him to the deepest, and gazed down into its bluish-green depth.

"Eugenia and I came here with bathing-dresses once," she said. "She funk'd, but I dived into this one ever so many times. But I never got to the bottom."

When they had finished the tea and the bread-and-butter, she washed out the flask in the lower and shallower pool; then, having packed her basket again, she washed her fingers.

"What a shame," she said, wiping them with her handkerchief after shaking off the drops, "to spoil that lovely water!"

She looked freely and sweetly up at him, standing over the shelving rock pool, dabbing her fingers of the left

hand with the handkerchief in her right. Then, suddenly, "Oh!" she cried, "I've lost my ring. I knew that finger had got too thin for it."

She appealed to the sympathy in Stephen's face.

"It must have slipped off in the water," she said. "It was my mother's. I can only just remember her."

In a moment he was down on his face, peering into the depth.

"The tea has fogged it a little," he said. "Wait. It's clearing."

After a while, "There it is," he cried; and, leaning a hand on his shoulder, she saw the gold and pearls shining up at her from some five feet down the sloping side of the pool.

Gambier put out his hand, then drew it back.

"Where's your stick?" he asked. "Hasn't it a spike at the end?"

She fetched it from where they had sat over their tea.

"I don't think my arm would reach, and it'd disturb the water worse than the stick. I shall put the spike through and scrape it upward. Bare your arm, and push it slowly down to meet the ring and get hold of it. Don't be nervous. If it slips, I'll get down to the bottom after it. You shan't lose it."

The stick was long and its point effective. Carefully he drew the ring within Clarissa's reach. Her bare arm, held aloft in triumph, delighted him.

She gave the ring into his hand.

"Look," she said. "Isn't it a sweet old thing?"

He stood a moment admiring the simple pearls and the delicate, old-fashioned working of the thin gold. When he had done, she held out her hand, the fingers spread, as if carelessly asking him to put it on. He had almost done so, when,

"Oh, not that one," said Clarissa, and, taking it from him, slipped the ring on the second finger of her left hand.

For a moment he was at a loss; but in the next he

remembered his mother telling him that marriage rings and engagement rings must be worn on what she called the "this-little-pig-had-none" finger.

Clarissa watched him as he ticked off his fingers. She wondered why his lips moved.

"Oh, my dear child!" he said with a burst, "what an ass I am! I've gassed a lot about playing this game properly, and I've never even got you a ring. What's to be done?"

"Any time will do, Mr. Gambier. I should think we might even get through without," she answered, looking very white. She was afraid he was laughing at her, so natural had his "dear child" sounded.

To a certain kind of young Englishwoman, the ring of betrothal is the symbol most wonderful in her life. Spiritually bound, she is physically still her own mistress. What she gives is still a gift, whether to remain so or become a duty being yet on the knees, often so bony and unlaplike, of the gods.

"There's Mrs. Templeton Cuyper," said Stephen. "Women see and think about these things, you know."

"Yes," said Clarissa, making an effort to recover from an unnamed shock she had felt. Succeeding, "Well," she said, with a kind of comical sweetness, "I tell you what we'll do. I'll put this dear old thing of my mother's in my handkerchief when I come down to dinner. If there are guests, and if they've been told what my father believes and Eugenia doesn't, I'll put it where they'll expect one. If they haven't been told, I'll put it back on its own modest finger."

When they were half-way home, it struck Gambier that they had walked a long time in silence. So, very subtly and by roundabout approaches, he got back to her laughter, making it ring through the twilight as it had rung when the paths and the torrent-beds were hot with the sun.

Before Clarissa had finished dressing, Eugenia, ready for dinner, came to her room.

"You were awfully late, child," she said. "What made you run it so fine?"

"Laughing," said Clarissa. "I don't believe I've laughed so much in all the rest of my life put together."

Eugenia had more policy than Clarissa gave her credit for. She did not ask what the girl had been laughing at.

"I should think you did laugh," she merely remarked. "I heard you, just as I was going to send out a search-party."

"All this fuss about ten minutes late," said Clarissa drily, "means, I suppose, that you've brought Mrs. Cuyper?"

"Silas has," said Eugenia.

"And her Pekingese?"

"Oh, yes."

"And her little husband?"

"Of course."

Clarissa's next question did not come with the same ease.

"Did you tell them I was—was engaged to be married?" she asked.

"Silas did," admitted Eugenia.

Clarissa did what the other had never seen her do before—positively pouted.

"I think it was very inconsiderate of him," she said.

"It ought to have rested with me, when people were to be told."

"He's as pleased about it now as he was cross and difficult yesterday. When you were ill-treating Mr. Gambier, he would have it that the poor man wasn't behaving well to you. But he likes Stephen—and he let the news slip out. Mrs. Templeton Cuyper has that effect upon him. Besides," added Eugenia, "I don't see that it matters much."

"Don't you? Well, there's no particular advantage for me in being spoken of as the girl who throws a man over three weeks after accepting him, is there?"

"Why not make it six?" asked Eugenia. And some-

how Clarissa resented the tone she used. Ignoring the suggestion,

"People always blame somebody," she said. "Whether it's me or Mr. Gambier, it's going to be equally unfair."

"So, in your heart, you're blaming me," said Eugenia, dolefully.

"No, no!" cried Clarissa. "Only father."

"I cannot allow that," said Eugenia, with a new dignity which struck Clarissa as very becoming. She remembered what Stephen had said about these two and the future. If he was right, it was all worth while.

She embraced Eugenia, and they left the room arm in arm.

Half-way down the broad marble staircase she stopped, pulling at a ring which refused for a moment to pass the knuckle of the second finger of her left hand.

Eugenia watched her.

"You used to wear that pretty old thing on the third of your right hand, Clarissa," she said.

"Yes. I dropped it into one of those dear pools, up the Borigo, this afternoon. It slipped off when I was dabbling my hand in the water. Mr. Gambier fished it out for me—so neatly! I put it on this finger—it's bigger at the knuckle—just a shade, and I was afraid of losing it again."

The ring was off.

"Then why move it?" asked Eugenia.

Clarissa put it on the finger which she had forbidden to Stephen Gambier—the third of the left.

"Oh, well," she said, "that's my father's fault. Poor Mr. Gambier! I mustn't let them think he doesn't do things according to Cocker."

CHAPTER XIII

THE RING OF OFFICE

THOUGH a hint was given to Mrs. Templeton Cuyper that the engagement of her host's daughter was not yet to be published to the world, it had not proved possible to lend the suggestion of reticence such weight as must insure her silence.

The man, from prominence in his profession and from recent political achievement, and the girl, from her father's wealth, were too conspicuous for their relation to remain secret after this garrulous woman had been informed.

Mrs. Cuyper went back to her yacht, taking with her the little dog and the little husband.

Silas, Eugenia and Clarissa had watched them drive away; Stephen, at a modest distance, had watched them watching. When Eugenia and Silas had gone back into the house,

"Don't you think," he asked, confronting Clarissa, "that we ought to keep up appearances?"

"How?" she asked.

"By going for a walk—a long walk," he explained; and Clarissa laughed, but did not answer. Instead,

"I don't think I ever met taste and opinions so impossible as Mrs. Cuyper's," she said. "My father likes her—says she amuses him. But I think he formed most of his tastes and opinions in the year eighty—or earlier. In those days everything American was exciting to the respectable yet intelligent English—because, you see, you were proper enough to be a little shocked by the awful things they said, yet open-minded enough to discover that they didn't mean any harm. The smoothest kind now have learned to be smoother than we are. But Mrs. Cuyper

makes her bid for success by going one better than the last generation."

"You make me uneasy," said Gambier. "Didn't someone tell me you were a bare three-and-twenty?"

"And a half, as the children say. Also, I've been told a few things, and read a lot more, Mr. Gambier. I shouldn't wonder," said Clarissa, with a kind of impudent meekness, "if you and I, after reading half a dozen books about him, don't understand more about Napoleon than if we'd been our present ages a hundred years ago. What d'you think of Mrs. Cuyper?"

"I liked her," said Stephen.

"Why?" asked Clarissa.

"I thought her taste excellent. I think you're hard on her."

"Perhaps I am. And I feel rather a pig, because she always makes such a fuss over me. All the same——"

"That's what I meant," said Stephen, interrupting.

Clarissa made no reply, but moved a little, as if to enter the house.

"But what about that walk?" asked Stephen. Mrs. Cuyper had stayed three days, and in that time they had been out alone together only once. "I've had no exercise, except with the Pekingese on the terrace. Please take me out."

"Very well," said Clarissa. "In ten minutes."

Just before she joined him, he saw her talking with Eugenia, to whom he was inclined to attribute the little air of restraint and resignation which piqued him during the first few hundred yards of their walk.

"You mustn't come, if it's a bore," he said kindly, if a little stiffly.

"It isn't," said the honest Clarissa. "And you made rather a point of it, didn't you?"

"I did—because there are only four more days. I'm going on Friday afternoon," he replied.

"Dr. Ambrose said you ought to stay another three weeks at least," said the girl.

"Ambrose," said Stephen, "belongs to the very best breed of doctor: always prescribes what the patient likes best. I'm sorry to say I was never fitter in my life."

"But why have you changed your plans?"

"There's such a thing as work. There's another called politics. I told your father this morning."

She looked at him with eyes still inquiring, as if the answer failed to satisfy her.

"Well," he said, "if you must have it, there is another reason. I wonder if two people, forced rather than drawn together, were ever more outspoken. The sooner I get away, the sooner it will be about decent time for you to write me that kind of desolating letter, in which you will tell me how sorry you are to have mistaken the nature of your feelings."

"I shall write such a stupid letter — I can't write letters unless I feel them," said Clarissa gloomily. "I haven't made any mistake," she added, as if in fear he would misunderstand her.

He smiled very jollily as she told herself. She felt vaguely, but told herself nothing about it, that the smile was rather too jolly.

"Don't let it trouble you," he said. "It's only part of the silly but necessary game. I'll write you a beautiful little letter to me before I go, and you can just copy it."

"Thank you," said Clarissa; "I shall feel as if I'd got one of the big girls to do a German exercise for me. All the same, I don't see that a week or two matters, now everybody knows."

"You think they do?"

"I think they will," said Clarissa. "I told you about my father and Mrs. Cuyper. And you heard some of the awful things she said."

"They were awful only because — because you know them absurd," replied Gambier. "And you're so dreadfully honest that such things vex you. But it is just Mrs. Cuyper that's made me hurry my going. She sails for

Algiers or Naples or Alexandria to-night. And it's just possible that she won't see an Englishwoman worth gossiping with before she's at sea. The yacht has no wireless installation — I asked her. So we might be — might be free, shall I say? — before she gets her work in. Then she'll be a back number."

There was a silence of several minutes. They had become so well used to each other that peace rather than discomfort was the note of the minutes which their tongues did not use.

Then Clarissa:

"I wonder how you knew how much I disliked the idea of — of people talking about us as engaged?"

"In our circumstances, Miss Beltervane," he replied, "I am sure any woman would dislike it."

She liked, at this juncture, the "Miss Beltervane," and the word "woman" accorded her a dignity which she was still young enough to prize.

"What I hate worst, I think," she said, "is being thought a person that doesn't know her own mind. I have a sort of contempt for girls that go and get engaged anyhow to anybody, and then cry off at the first difference of opinion. They use an engagement to find out what they ought to have found out before it began. I have known one or two that behaved worse than housemaids 'walking out.'"

"I think that's a very good system, you know," said Stephen.

"For housemaids, no doubt," said Clarissa, primly, and was silent for many minutes.

This was Monday afternoon — to be precise, Monday, 17th October. Stephen intended travelling on the coming Friday, reaching London on the Saturday, and getting into harness once more on the Monday. And already he found he was counting the days and the number of rambles with Clarissa which they might be coaxed to furnish.

On the Tuesday he said he must go to Mentone; would Clarissa (it was said at table), since the time of their companionship was growing so short, go with him?

Clarissa went.

He left her in the car, while he fetched from his hotel the few letters not yet forwarded to Les Nuages; paid his bill, and gave orders for the despatch of the luggage not yet removed.

A lady, it seemed, had called to ask after Mr. Gambier's health; had been told that Mr. Gambier was recovered, and that he was staying at the *château* of M. Silas Beltervane. No, the lady had left no card; had seemed well satisfied with the news and had departed. Yes — a tall lady, and certainly dark. English? Oh, English without question. A lady very handsome, and *parfaitement comme il faut*. Madame, opined the manager, had driven over the border from Bordighera or San Remo.

Stephen returned to the car with an expression so thoughtful upon his face that Clarissa asked him sympathetically whether he had bad news.

"Somebody has called to inquire about my health, and left no card. I'm only trying to guess who it could have been."

Once more he kept her waiting, while he spent ten minutes in a jeweller's shop. He came out looking so well pleased that this time she made no comment at all.

When he had given her tea at Rumpelmayer's, he asked her permission to drive out to the little railway station of Roque Brune. As they drew near it, some two miles and a half along the Cornice westward of Mentone,

"I have a fancy," he said, "for leaving all this loveliness from that funny little station which seems so hot and unnecessary, with a little stone town looking down on it. I feel as if Mentone itself would take the taste of things here out of my mouth too soon. It's like Brighton — with a decent climate. I'm going to ask if my train on Friday can be stopped for me."

"They've done it for father sometimes, I know," said Clarissa.

When they drew up at the station, he asked if she

wouldn't send the car home and walk with him the rest of the way.

"Of course I will," she answered. "And I know a path ever so much jollier than the road, and nearly twice as long."

When Stephen had made his inquiries, they stood a moment idly watching the approach of a train from the east. Like most of the *omnibus* trains, it crawled very slowly into the station, and long before it came to rest Stephen's eye was caught by the profile of a woman's face in a first-class compartment.

These weeks since his accident had been a pool severed from the stream of his life—a pool often troubled so that its tiny waves mimicked to admiration the storms of the ocean, but smoothed in the latter days to a clearness and a delicate colour peculiar to itself. The sight of Miriam Lemesurier's face was like a trickle of the torrent which must come to join his pool with past and future.

"What a splendid face!" said Clarissa softly. "Oh, she's looking at us."

"It's Mrs. Lemesurier," said Gambier, raising his hat to Miriam. "You'll excuse me a moment, won't you, Miss Beltervane?"

Left alone, Clarissa watched the meeting, and then, with instinctive delicacy, strolled to the eastern end of the platform.

"Was it you," asked Stephen, "that called to inquire about me at my hotel?"

"Yes," said Miriam. "The day before yesterday. I've been in Florence with the Stuckleys. It was only a week ago that I heard of your accident. I accepted at once an invitation I'd had to visit the Farmers at their funny little villa at Ospedaletti. I drove over from there to inquire about you. You look all right."

"I am. The Beltervane people have been very good. That's Miss Beltervane with me."

Miriam looked after the retreating figure.

"I hardly saw her face," she said. "But she walks beautifully."

"Yes," he said. "She does."

"Was it she you snatched from the runaway car?"

"No. Her stepmother."

"Oh, yes! He married from behind the counter, didn't he?"

"So I've heard," said Stephen. "But they're tooting that silly trumpet. Are you going to be abroad all the winter?"

"No," said Miriam. "I'm going to Cannes now, and I shall be in London on Thursday or Friday."

The train was moving.

"So shall I — on Saturday," said Stephen, walking beside it.

"You'll come and see me as soon as you can, won't you, Stephen? They say Milroy's sure to resign, if he doesn't die."

He promised, and she was gone.

"She's a Mrs. Lemesurier. She has a house on Campden Hill," he said, as he fell into step with Clarissa. "She made my career, as they say — insisting on having me briefed in a claim she had against a railway company."

"Did you win it?" asked Clarissa.

"Yes — so that the litigious tumbled over each other to get me to win impossible cases for them."

"She's splendid to look at," said Clarissa.

Clarissa's path had both the merits she had claimed for it; but it was not long enough to use up all the time at their disposal. They eked it out by sitting on a pleasant hill-side.

Here Stephen took from his pocket a package he had brought from the jeweller's shop.

Clarissa unwrapped it, opened the little box, and found a ring.

"I'm rather uncomfortable about it," said Stephen. "It's the official substitute for those pretty pearls."

"They're the very colour of the water in my pools," said Clarissa.

"Yes," said Stephen. "The big middle stone is the middle pool—the pool of which you could never reach the bottom. This one," he went on, touching a smaller of the three aquamarines, "is the pool we at least got something out of. And the third—well," he said, breaking off, "the little diamond sparks all round about know more of that one than I do. I want you to use it till the comedy is played out. Afterwards, of course, it must be deposed from that third finger. But I should think it kind of you, if you'd put it away with the others, or find a less haughty finger to wear it on."

"It's a delicious little ring," said Clarissa. Then, moving the pearls to their old finger, she pushed the bluish-green stones to their appointed place. "I'll keep it, Mr. Gambier—for friendship."

"Afterwards?"

"Always," she answered simply.

"I'm glad," he said. "Because it will be all that's left."

"Left of what?" she asked.

"Of the friendship."

"I don't see why," said the girl looking up from her ring, with a white face.

"After you have—have given me my dismissal," explained Stephen, "I shall write to you, of course, one letter expressing my regret, and thanking you for the courtesy with which you have tried to soften the blow to me, politely giving you your freedom and wishing you every kind of happiness in the future. After that, I don't really see how we shall ever meet—and we certainly can't write to each other."

"It's not fair," cried Clarissa. "It's sickening. I feel as if somebody had cheated me and I couldn't make a fuss about it. It's wasteful and silly. You've been so awfully kind to me. Father owes you just—just everything. You're awfully clever, Mr. Gambier. You ought to invent something."

"Some day, of course," said Stephen, "you'll go and get married. Then ——"

Clarissa stared at him coldly. Something had hurt her, and the pain made her angry.

"You cannot expect me to do that just to oblige you, Mr. Gambier," she said.

"That is unkind and unjust," said Stephen.

Clarissa rose.

"This path is a longer round than I remembered," she said. "Shall we go on?"

They went on, for some time in silence. As they drew near home, the narrowing track compelled the man to drop behind. Just before it widened again to lead them down to the road a few hundred yards below Les Nuages, Clarissa stopped, but did not immediately turn her face to him. When she did, it still bore traces of conflict.

"I hate saying I'm sorry," she declared with a jerk. Then her face cleared altogether, and she laughed. "But it's rather nice when it's over. I apologise. If—if it's got to be cut off short some day, Mr. Gambier, I mean to make the most of your friendship while I've got it."

"And I of yours," he responded.

In silence of the better quality they walked to the door of Les Nuages.

Clarissa paused a moment before going in.

"All the same," she said, "I do think you might think of something."

CHAPTER XIV

THE GREAT IDEA

EUGENIA, with unforced freedom of heart, had been for some days a curious spectator of the comedy played in her interest. She ought, perhaps, to have felt some shame at the deceit which her silliness had forced upon two people so temperamentally averse from duplicity. But along with her sentimental *penchant* for Stephen Gambier she had thrown away with a light conscience all sense of responsibility for the consequences; in which convenient feat she was certainly helped by an early suspicion, soon amounting to expectation, that the comedy was bound before long to abandon the region of art for that of nature. With an excellent eye for the initial symptoms of a love-affair, she knew, or believed she knew, in what direction matters were tending, long before it dawned upon Clarissa that what she was fearing to lose was something other than mere friendship. It is even probable that Stephen himself was later than his hostess in perceiving his own danger; for Eugenia was looking for what she wished to discover, Stephen, perhaps, resisting the warnings he feared.

On that Tuesday night, however, self-deception ceased to be possible.

He knew himself, and told himself that he knew himself to be in love — in love with little prospect of getting out — in love as completely and foolishly as if he had been not one of those eight years older than the girl herself. In spite of the pleasure which the sight and the sound of her gave him, up here in his room at night the thing vexed him. He had neither wished it to happen, nor feared that it would happen to him. It would not have happened to him, at least, not with this young woman, if he had not

been so inconveniently forced into her company. Advantage had been taken somehow, he felt, of his good feeling, so that the smooth order of his living was invaded. He was annoyed, discontented, almost ashamed of the pain with which he contemplated the parting.

Reason for thinking she was affected by him in a sense complimentary he had none; yet he felt that he was held off. Seeing, he argued with that part of himself which persisted ever in arguing with him—seeing that she admitted solicitude for the friendship, why should she freeze, thrusting him away, and rely, it would seem, at one moment upon the inviolability of her violable sex, and the next upon a kind of impersonality in which she contrived to drape her person.

After all, if you came to think of it, he knew little enough of the type. She might see him from any one of a hundred different points of view of which he had no conception. He must shake it off; for was not his state a kind of slavery quite unbecoming a man of his standing?

And all the time, beneath this foolish guessing and calculation, some part of him was urgently occupied with the greatest question of all: at how early an hour to-morrow, namely, would it be possible to get her away, walking once more with him alone?

To shake it off, then, he set himself down to write for her the draft of the letter by means of which she was to sever the bond that, having drawn them together, had yet no sanction to bind. At first his complaint had been of the lie which had made him seem tied where no tie existed; now, that he could not claim a bond which had been declared to the world.

Outside the needs of his profession, Stephen Gambier had not written at all. He had narrowly escaped the necessity of writing for the daily and weekly press, had never had the desire to compose play, novel or short story. Yet at this moment he made up his mind, though lacking acquired facility of putting himself into the skin of another, to write such a letter as he believed Clarissa Belter-

vane must write, when she found herself unable honestly to keep promise of marriage to such a man as he believed Clarissa Beltervane must think him.

"MY DEAR MR. GAMBIER,— Since you left Les Nuages, you have written me three very kind letters, some of them long, and all interesting. You may perhaps have wondered why my notes in answer have been so short and so dull. And that, I am sorry to say, is what I have to explain — sorry, I mean, if the explanation is going to cause you any distress.

"I find I have made a mistake — one that pains me more, I hope, than its discovery will hurt you.

"It seems such a wicked thing to tell anyone you love him, when you don't. I know now that I do not love you, and I am ashamed. All I can say to excuse myself is, that when I said I did, I thought I knew I did.

"You have been very kind — always. Will you be kind now, and believe this without asking for reasons and explanations? Please give me back my promise, and please forgive me if in this or in any other way I have vexed or disappointed you.

"Very sincerely yours,

"CLARISSA BELTERVANE."

Having written, corrected and copied this, he imagined, as he read it over, a Clarissa who had loved, and a Stephen Gambier cast off. Self-pity was a ludicrous thing; he did not recognise himself in a ludicrous attitude; and yet he could not deny that he was pitying himself even more in this imaginary posture than he did in his actual.

Falling asleep at last, he had a swiftly passing but vivid apparition of himself — a man that had held in his arms a gracile, womanly but child-like figure; seen the eyes raised with a new meaning; seen the lips offered, and expectant of a new thing; and felt the warm pliancy of it stiffen suddenly and fade, sliding from his hold; while the face he was to have felt against his own now regarded him from

afar with the acid smile of the Pharisee's negative virtue.

What else he dreamed he forgot in the surprise of the wavering and troubled sunlight which awoke him. He had closed his eyes about three o'clock, and this, for a man used to count pillows and sleep as one, should have made him sleep late. But it was, when he awoke, not long after six o'clock.

He was in the garden a little less after seven. And there, mounting for the first time to the top of the Saracen Tower, he found Clarissa.

They stared at each other, and then, for some absurd reason, or for no reason at all, each laughed as if the other had already spoken.

"Oh, I'm always up awfully early," said Clarissa.

"Mine is the greater virtue, then," said Stephen. "I never am — except to-day. I went to sleep about three and woke at six."

Clarissa frowned; and even her frowning, with its delicate, perpendicular lines between the eyebrows, had a new charm for him, though he had seen those lines oftener than her smiles.

Frowning, Clarissa said: "You must be ill."

"Some kind of fever, perhaps," he suggested doubtfully.

"Have you a temperature?" she asked anxiously.

"Ninety-eight. I never reach the odd fractions. I'm cold-blooded," replied Stephen.

"Then why did you sleep only three hours, instead of nine?" she asked.

"I was busy — about how you are to get out of it."

"Get out of what?"

"I mean, repudiate the provisional contract without forfeiting the deposit."

"Oh, I see. Well, did you find a way — come to any conclusion?"

"I wrote a most moving letter for you to copy," said Stephen. "But about the other thing —"

"You mean, keeping the — keeping our friendship?"

"Yes. Now, I don't see how that can be done within the limited bounds you set. But I have a scheme of rather larger scope which I think would meet the case — perhaps rather more than cover it."

Clarissa was looking very solemn and a little puzzled. But her eyes shone.

"Please tell me about it," she said.

But suddenly Stephen Gambier was afraid — with a kind of fear he felt for the first time. This case, if ever any, needed delicate handling. He had generally got what he wanted; but now he was desiring a greater thing than ever before, and desiring it with a depth of passion which shook his trust in his own judgment. In dread of a wrong step he hesitated to take any.

He was silent so long that Clarissa, looking at him, wondered why his lips were so white, his face so dull and motionless.

"The details," he said at last, "are not quite worked out. Can we have a walk together this afternoon?"

"Why, of *course!*" said the girl, as if he had asked whether the sun would rise.

"Then I'll tell you, out among the hills," he said. "It's a wonderful idea, but you may find it hard to grasp, and we don't want to be interrupted, do we?"

"Oh, no!" she answered, with a simplicity which, while he felt it adorable, was so direct that for a moment he lost hope of touching the spring which is more often found by accident than intention.

Later, she found he had come downstairs before the morning coffee and rolls had reached his bedroom.

"I had mine," she said. "But it seems so long ago that I'm going to do it again," and ordered fresh coffee on the terrace.

Before they had done Eugenia and, a little later, Silas joined them. That the whole party should be together at this hour was unusual. Silas the business man seemed to think his idleness at this time of day needed excuse; he explained that rain was coming, and that he was getting

the best of the day out of doors, and would attend to his letters in the afternoon. So, until breakfast, they sat or walked about the terraced garden, Eugenia openly bewailing the shortness of Stephen's remaining days, Silas at last opening his heart on the misdeeds of his political party, and Clarissa for the most part silent in that manner of hers which had the sympathy of speech.

When the late breakfast was nearly over,

"Is it going to rain, father?" asked Clarissa plaintively.

"The glass is falling," he replied.

"But there's our walk this afternoon."

Silas laughed kindly in the style of the worn convention which laughs at each new pair of lovers as if their manners were new to the world.

Clarissa flushed, and Stephen wished he could explain the pretty colour as her father interpreted it.

"It's not kind to laugh at me, father dear," she said.

"If I have had a great many walks with — Stephen, I shan't get many more. And I enjoy them," she added, with a glance at the man whose name still needed an effort.

"We'll go — wet or shine," he said.

"There'll be thunder," said Silas.

"That settles it. A thunderstorm's better than any play I've seen."

"Dress-circle or stalls?" asked Clarissa.

"Circle," replied Stephen promptly. "Stalls for Ibsen, Strindberg, and Maeterlinck; but dress-circle for Shakespeare, Rostand and a thunderstorm."

"I know where the dress-circle is," said Clarissa, with subdued glee. "What time does the show begin, father dear?"

Silas looked at the clouds, growing slowly heavier and lower. The heat grew with them. Eugenia was fanning herself.

"About three o'clock," he said; he had a family reputation for weather-wisdom.

"Then we'll start in half an hour—if you want the front row."

"I insist upon the front," replied Stephen. "Sticks, macintoshes and no frills in half an hour, then."

She took him the way she had gone on the afternoon of her father's unexpected return. As they left the mule-track called the Roman Road to pick their way up the path which went by the cottage of Major Evans,

"The dress-circle," said Clarissa, "has another entrance, which I like better. But I know we can get through this way, and I want to show you the place where that strange man lives who calls himself Evans. You'll be gentle with him, if he meets us and asks about your soul, won't you? Because I believe he's really interested in them."

They passed the house, but saw nobody. But they had been seen from the window, and the tall, thin man with the limping leg came to his door and looked after the man and the girl who walked so well together.

He looked at the sky, shook his head and went in again.

But the man and the girl tramped on. The valley tapered as it rose, till the path led them over a ridge. This they followed inland a little, until Clarissa found her dress-circle from which to witness the pageant of the storm Silas Beltervane had promised them.

It was a group of huge stones, nestled under one of the ridges rising from the valley of the Gorbio torrent towards Mont Agel. Near enough to its summit to obtain great extension of outlook, they had, looking southward, a footstool of dwindling hills, a carpet of leaden-blue sea, and a ceiling of clouds leaden-black—dreadful one might have called it, were it not that to the two whose concern in it concerns us it brought an expectant joy; it might have been the curtain with symbols painted upon it, suggesting the glories of the pantomime to happy children in the pit, before ever the first fiddle has moaned to its tuning.

When they had settled themselves on adjacent boulders, comfortably sheltered from the rain, should it strike from the north,

"If they do give a performance to-day," said Clarissa, "this is the circle, I'm sure. The gallery is northwards, towards the Pas des Cabanettes."

After a pause, while she watched him light his pipe,

"I believe father's a good prophet again," she said. "They're turning down the lights."

"Then we'd better get to business," said Stephen, throwing away his match with a jerk.

Clarissa noticed the change in his tone, and refrained from looking at him.

"Business?" she asked.

"The matter of that contract — agreement."

"Oh, yes. You mean your idea of how I might 'repudiate the provisional agreement without forfeiting the guarantee fund'?"

"Yes," said Stephen. That she had remembered even some of his words steadied his nerve. "But first — this is the draft letter I promised you."

She read slowly, read again, and handed it back to him.

"Why, Clarissa," he said, so easy with her name that she did not feel it unusual, although they were alone, — "why, Clarissa, it's only sport — you mustn't let it hurt you. It's just part of the silly game, you know."

She bit back the tears.

"It's a good game — a horrible lie, but a sporting game," she said. "But you've played it too well in that letter. How — how did you know so well what I should have felt, if — if I had really thought that, and then unthought it again?"

"By knowing how I should have felt," he answered.

Clarissa looked at him doubtfully.

"It's confusing, isn't it?" she asked. "But, anyhow, my people wouldn't think of reading my letters. I had only to write to you that — that —"

"You had only to blow the whistle for 'time,' you mean? Oh, yes. But you said you couldn't write a proper letter. That seemed to imply that you might find it convenient to

have a letter to show — a letter fitting the game that you say is sporting, but a horrid falsehood.”

“Yes — I remember,” admitted Clarissa. “As I said, it’s confusing.”

“It’s natural enough,” said Gambier. “I’ve seen boys — and men — lose their temper at football.”

Clarissa stiffened.

“I haven’t been ill-tempered, have I?” she asked.

“Of course not,” replied Stephen, genial with hope. “I meant that just as a man may get confused in his innards and fancy a rough game is a bloodthirsty battle, so you, reading my work of art, might imagine for a moment that the letter was yours, the feelings yours, and that I was truly in danger of being hurt, and all the rest of it that we find in novels.”

Clarissa, in a manner inexplicable to herself, was offended. But Stephen Gambier had used a tool he understood.

“Novels!” she exclaimed. Her father was born in the year 1860; had consequently read many novels; liked, except the more popular poems of Alfred Tennyson, no books so well; yet mentioned his reading of a novel always as a deed needing explanation, if not apology.

“I didn’t use the word in contempt,” Stephen explained. “Novels are the truest books there are.”

“Most of them are fearful rubbish,” expostulated Clarissa.

“Perhaps. I grant it for argument. That is what makes them true. I once saw a little history-book about Rome. It began with that nice she-wolf. The man that wrote the little book told the dear tale of her — even printed a pretty picture of her, being kind to the twins, I think. And then he was at pains to explain that she didn’t probably ever exist, nor was kind. But he never saw that, wolf or no wolf, that was the history of Rome, because it was what had helped millions of Romans to think themselves and to be perfect devils of fellows.”

"That doesn't make novels true."

"It's an illustration. Novels are true, because some tell you true things about humans; some tell you true things about the human beings that wrote them; and most tell you true things about what really pleases the people that read them."

"I see," said Clarissa. "But we've got off the point."

"The point," said Stephen, "is that the draft letter of my dismissal is dramatic. You needn't use it. It need not distress you—though I confess, when I read it over it nearly made me—well, I found it quite pathetic."

"I think you are horrid!"

"You would. But I'll bet you a thunderstorm to a real love-letter," said Stephen, "that you can't tell me why."

Clarissa stared out over the sea, and up at the clouds. Stephen glanced at her, and went on.

"I'm sorry if the letter won't do," he said very gently. "But it doesn't really matter at all, if you adopt the Great Idea, which I was to tell you about—because that will make any such letter unnecessary."

"The Great Idea!" she exclaimed. "Oh, yes—about repudiating something without forfeiting something else. Well?"

"That original agreement—understanding—contract—it's all the same, you see, with men of honour—that arrangement, you see, was bad in law, fraudulent—intended to deceive the market—to give a false impression of solid capital invested. My plan is to capitalise the scheme properly. There was once a man who pretended to find a gold mine—pretended very well. Lots of people put money in to help to dig out the gold that wasn't there. Then, just when he'd have had to bolt with their money, he found real gold—heaps of it—in the pit that he'd thought no better than his mother's dust-hole in Peckham Rye. He's a great man now, and immensely honest. Won't you make me—don't you think we might make each other immensely honest, Clarissa?"

Behind a face very grave, she seemed to be turning it over in her mind.

"Do you mean," she asked, "that you want us to be really — in love?"

"I mean that I am. It made me angry at first. So now I want you to be."

With the ghost of a smile she answered:

"That's vindictive. And, what is much worse, it's not fair. It wasn't in the bond."

"You can't blame me, Clarissa," he said, "for wanting to make a fraudulent scheme into an honest one — to offer your father a solid investment in place of a wild-cat scheme. Besides, it's your fault."

"What is my fault?"

"That I want you to do this."

"Do you mean that we are to — to marry each other?"

"I mean that I love you — you've made me. I couldn't get away from you. I mean that I want you, in natural consequence, to love me. I'm hoping you won't be able to get away from it, either. And then, of course, we shall be married."

"But I've been meaning friendship!" cried Clarissa, aghast.

"Doesn't the love which induces people to marry each other include friendship?" asked Stephen.

"It must, I suppose," replied Clarissa discontentedly.

"But I do think the whole thing's unfair."

"That's what I thought," said Stephen.

"When?"

"Last night, when I'd written that letter."

"Oh, I see," said Clarissa. "You got tangled up — fancied me, and then yourself, in the position — in the state of mind that my father thinks we're in."

"No," said Stephen. "I knew you were not. I knew I was. And I wished you were."

"How can I be? It's not a matter of wishing."

"You might be — if ——"

"If I tried?" she asked sarcastically, filling his pause.

"Trying's no good," he answered. "I mean, if you'd let go — not try anything — just be."

"Be?"

"Yes. If you'll be you — feel your own feelings without bothering about what you ought or ought not to feel. You've said a good deal, you know," he went on in the persuasive voice which sometimes moved her to antagonism, from very fear of yielding before even she knew whither she was being persuaded — "you've said a good deal about our wicked subterfuge for your pretty stepmother being a lie."

"Yes, I have," said Clarissa. "It is."

"But has it never struck you," asked Stephen, "that there may be a greater deception going on? I'm only asking. But you started with a prejudice — a very natural prejudice against me. Let go. Give me a chance. I do love you — most painfully at present. I want my own."

"Wanting a thing doesn't make it yours," objected Clarissa, laughing at him.

"I'm not sure. And you aren't a thing. That's the difference. I have wanted things and nearly always got them, because I wanted them. Somehow very few became mine. But this time I'm going to get all the — the *mineness*."

"How can you possibly tell?"

"Well, you see — before, things came into my hands because I wanted them. But this time, I believe, I am wanting because the thing, which isn't a thing, is mine already."

She was not in love with him. She told herself that she was not — that she would not be in love. It was horrid, somehow, if merely being forced for a week or so into a man's company were to compel a poor girl to fall down and worship him. Yet something, perhaps his very ardour of assurance, made her afraid, so that her voice wavered uncomfortably as she answered him.

"That's confusing, Mr. Gambier — very topsy-turvy, don't you think? It comes to this, I suppose: that I am

to believe that you want me more than you ever wanted any other — thing."

"I do — whether you believe or disbelieve," answered Stephen.

"Why?"

"Because most things get smaller in one's hands. This gets bigger the longer you hold it."

"But you aren't holding it," she cried, merely plaintive where she wished to be indignant. "Are you a prophet, to know beforehand?"

"Every man's a prophet sometimes," Stephen answered. "The god speaks inside."

"But you can't know when it's he and when it's just yourself."

"This time," he said, "I do know."

A world-wide sheet of violent lightning showed them the earth at their feet. The revelation was so appalling in its brilliance that Clarissa, by no means a timorous woman, and quite honest in declaring her love of storms, gasped as if in pain, and caught at Stephen Gambier's arm and shoulder with both hands. In the utter darkening of their eyes which filled the few seconds before the thunder came, his left arm went round her. She sat beside him on the same boulder, and the crash which enveloped them in sound only less terrible than the light which had left her trembling, prevented any idea of refusing this simple protection.

For some twenty minutes they sat thus, watching a display magnificent past describing. Clarissa's fear was soon lost in wonder and elemental delight.

It was a great spectacle, Clarissa the perfect spectator; and only when the wind, driving the storm from them with increasing intervals between its light and its sound, lashed their faces with the rain, did she draw away from Gambier's support.

"Thank you," she said simply. "Oh, I wouldn't have missed this for anything."

Then the rain increased, coming down as the girl at least

had never seen it fall before. Delighting in this too, she was again silent.

He had held her in his arms; and some day, he knew, when he was not there to hold, Clarissa would remember. Meantime, her joy was in the rain, falling in rope-like streaks.

Flashes of lightning, growing ever farther from them, illumined now and again the falling water, making of it a curtain lucent but opaque. Clarissa clapped her hands at it, shrinking back as far as she could go beneath the overhanging rocks.

"Isn't it splendid?" she cried. "I don't believe we could see each other, three yards apart, nor hear footsteps against the huge splash of it."

As if to prove the truth of her words, there suddenly appeared, quite close, the Englishman of the cottage they had passed in the little valley. Dressed in a fisherman's oilskins, whose looseness gave him bulk, his chin sunk in the coat-collar and the sou'wester pulled hard down over brows and nape, so that little but the fiercely bright eyes was visible, he was an object even stranger at first sight, Clarissa thought, than when he had glowered at her over his garden wall.

"I am glad I have found you, Miss Beltervane," he said. "I saw you go past my house. When the storm came, I was afraid you might take the other track homeward. That would not be safe in such a rainfall."

Clarissa thanked him pleasantly, and asked what was the danger.

Major Evans explained that by whatever path they should descend, except that through his valley, they ran the risk of finding the way barred by torrent-beds suddenly filled, and even of being cut off by the rise of other streams behind them.

The downpour abating, the three began the descent in company. Clarissa said:

"This is Mr. Stephen Gambier, Major Evans. Oh, but — am I right in calling you Major?"

"*Major* is correct, Miss Beltervane," he replied stiffly. The path narrowing, Stephen fell behind; Clarissa went on talking to her companion.

She told him how her father had foretold the storm, and how she and Mr. Gambier had come out to see it.

"To me, Miss Beltervane," said the recluse, "a commotion so tremendous is a terrible image of the wrath of Jehovah. Duty may bring one abroad in the teeth of it, but I could never go out to inspect its manifestations as if they were a rare show. Curiosity may become irreverence."

"My curiosity," replied Clarissa sweetly, "is not vulgar. I have been worshipping a beauty that very soon cast out the fear."

This led them into a discussion whose theology had no interest for Stephen; who took, nevertheless, keen pleasure, not only in the girl's adroitness of reply, but even more in the gentleness and liberal catholicity with which she seemed to attempt the softening of a bitter creed in an unhappy mind.

As the party reached the stone cottage, the rain came down once more as heavily as before. Evans held open the wooden gate in the low wall, and they ran to his porch for shelter. Courteously enough, yet almost, Clarissa thought, as if under compulsion he were breaking some rule of his life, he helped the girl to take off her rain-coat, and asked them into his long, low, barely furnished sitting-room. Here, saying he would do his best to get a cup of tea, their strange host left them.

This was the room where Clarissa, by the light from a side window, had seen him gazing at what she had supposed a picture. It was now, however, so darkened by the thunder-clouds that Gambier and the girl, standing near the window in the front wall, could only just make out each other's faces.

In low voices they spoke of what they had seen, and of the man whose clatter of tea-cups and metal came to them down the narrow stone passage.

"He's a long time," said Stephen at last. "If you really are at all wet, we'd better have kept moving."

"We can't be rude to him, poor man," she replied, "especially when it costs him such an effort to be nice. Look," she cried, "it's clearing fast."

As she spoke, the clouds broke and a ray direct from the sun shot through the side window. Clarissa turned, and,

"Oh, there's the picture," she cried softly. Then, gazing at it, "Oh, oh, oh!" she murmured. "What a painting to find up here in the hills! It must be a Sergeantson."

She heard a checked exclamation behind her, looked at Gambier's face, and again at the painting. Then,

"It's your friend," she said, astonished—"the beautiful woman you met yesterday, looking out of the train."

Even more than this that ray of sunlight had told Stephen. This man in the oilskins was Vincent Urquhart; the man who had divorced Miriam Lemesurier, and repented his kindness ever since; the man who must not know the name she lived under nor the place of her dwelling.

Instead of answering at once, he followed Clarissa across the room. Before he reached her she spoke again.

"I'm sure it is—younger, but the same woman. Don't you remember? Why, you said her name was Lemesurier and that she has a house on Campden Hill."

He touched her shoulder.

"Be quiet," he whispered.

Turning in surprise at the curious quality of his voice, she saw Evans behind him, in the doorway. The oilskins had been put off, the feet were shod with string-soled slippers. Over the tea-tray in his hand his eyes sent out a double gleam more terribly blue, she thought, than ever.

Softly he came to the table, and set down the tray. His eyes went to the picture, and back to Clarissa.

"May I ask, Miss Beltervane, what name it was you were saying as I entered?"

Clarissa, feeling she had made some dreadful mistake, hesitated.

"We were speaking," said Stephen, smoothly, "of a friend of mine we met yesterday — a Mrs. Le Marchant, who lives at Camberly."

"I heard Miss Beltervane mention a name, Mr. Gambier — not you," said Evans.

"Exactly. She was repeating a name and address of which I had just reminded her," persisted Stephen.

Dimly Clarissa felt that her words, if overheard, had carried danger. She knew that Stephen had lied on the off-chance that they had been imperfectly overheard. She looked at Major Evans' face, and felt that the falsehood had been in vain.

"Ah!" he said. "It sounded like another name. I will ask you to pardon my curiosity." Then, turning to Clarissa, "I see you are admiring my picture," he continued, and crossed the room to that side upon which it hung.

"A Sergeantson, isn't it?" asked the girl.

"A Sergeantson," said Evans.

"A wonderfully beautiful face," said Gambier, staring with the interest of the unperturbed at this splendid presentment of a younger Miriam than he had known.

"A face so beautiful, Mr. Gambier," said Evans, laying his hand on a curtain of dark silk which hung bunched beside the frame, "that I always keep it veiled"; and drew the curtain across the picture.

Clarissa broke the silence which followed with a pleasantly imperious request for tea.

"It should have been sooner ready," said her host, "if I kept a servant. But for a woman who makes my bed and disturbs the dust with pretence of sweeping for two hours every morning, I do all things myself."

Clarissa drank more tea than she desired, talked more than Stephen found quite in her character, and did all she could to draw the grim Evans out of his shell. She felt the smallness of her success, though he spoke with courtesy,

and regarded her more than once with eyes somewhat softening.

When they had taken leave and were well away from the house,

"What have I done, Stephen?" she asked, unconscious of the name she had never before given him in private. It gave him pleasure, not so much that she should use the name, but that she had used it unconsciously in a moment of distress.

"You have dropped a natural word like a white stone into a muddy pond," he answered. "You couldn't help it. The worst is that you have heard me once more saying the thing which was not. I couldn't help it. But you will think it my average form, I'm afraid."

"What rubbish!" she exclaimed. "All the same, you know," she added mischievously, "you do do it well when you have to."

"Not quite well enough, this time, I'm afraid."

"You mean he didn't believe in Le Marchant and Camberly?"

Stephen nodded.

"I'm afraid he didn't," she admitted, remembering the man's face as he listened. "All the same, that wouldn't matter much, would it, as long as he didn't hear or didn't remember Lemesurier and Campden Hill."

"I'm afraid he will remember," said Stephen. "I should like to tell you—but I can't much. That picture being there told me who the man is."

"If guessing weren't rude," began Clarissa, and stopped.

"It isn't," said Stephen.

"I should guess, then, that he's her husband, and worried her about her soul till she ran away from him—poor thing! And that he isn't Evans, and she's not Lemesurier."

Stephen laughed. "Will you do something for me?" he asked.

"Of course I will."

"Don't mention anything about the picture, nor the man's

queer behaviour — nor about the lady you saw at the station yesterday.”

“Of course I won’t.”

“I know a great deal about Mrs. Lemesurier’s affairs,” Stephen went on, “and I think very highly of her. And it vexes me to think he may have got hold of her address.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Clarissa. “Horrid old man! Creeping about in those nasty rope shoes, like a cat!”

“That doesn’t sound like you,” said Gambier. “I thought you rather liked him.”

“I was sorry for him — it’s pathetic to see a man worry so dreadfully about other people’s souls — especially when, on his own theory, nothing he does can possibly make any difference. I called him names, you see,” she added, “because I’d done a silly and indiscreet thing, and wanted to blame somebody else.”

“How often,” asked Stephen, “must I tell you it wasn’t your fault?”

“It was. When you didn’t answer my first exclamation, I ought to have waited till you spoke. I went on asking questions without even looking round, and one of them did the mischief.”

“Oh, my dear girl!” cried Stephen, “you can’t be expected to go about the world as if it were a Gaboriau novel. Be natural, sweet child, and let who will be Sherlock Holmes.”

“Sweet child” was a legitimate quotation, and therefore did not count; but his “Oh, my dear girl!” with its note of familiar expostulation, was curiously pleasant.

All she replied was this:

“One may be innocent as can be, and yet hate being the — the vehicle of mischief. I’ve been that to you too often.”

He did not answer, but noted how the grace of words took all weakness out of her humility.

A very hot bath and a good dinner left Clarissa Beltervane much happier than she felt she had any right to be. All the evening Stephen had never once renewed the conversation which had been interrupted by the first flash of

lightning. But they happened to be alone when they parted for the night.

"You remember what we were speaking of—in the dress-circle," he asked, "when the curtain went up and interrupted us?"

"Yes," said Clarissa.

"Well—Oh, don't look tired, Miss Beltervane."

"I didn't," said Clarissa.

"To what I said then, I just want to add this: let the provisional agreement——"

"Fraudulent," said Clarissa, correcting him.

"Let the fraudulent contract, then, be replaced by a *bona fide* provisional agreement. I mean, don't send me the letter till I've seen you again. It won't hurt you to wait a little for your liberty. I'll write——"

Clarissa interrupted eagerly.

"Will you write to me?" she asked.

"Of course," replied Stephen. "I must, you see, to keep up the comedy."

"Oh, bother the comedy!" cried Clarissa buoyantly. "It's the letters I'm thinking of. Will you promise to write once a week?"

"Often, if you like."

"And may I write whenever I like?"

"Of course you may."

"*Va pour le contrat provisionel*," said Clarissa. "That's just what I wanted."

"I don't understand," said Stephen.

At once she was serious.

"Mr. Gambier," she said, "I shall hate saying good-bye to you, the day after to-morrow. You are the most interesting person I know. But I haven't—I can't—I don't *think* I want to marry you."

"Well," said Stephen, "you know what I want, don't you? I believe, you know, that you resent the artificial conditions which have given us the opportunity of knowing each other so well. But never mind that. Let's call it a bargain. To the world, for a while longer, we are

fiancés; to each other, letter-friends. To the future we are what it shall make of us."

"Thank you," said Clarissa.

"And to-morrow," Stephen went on, "the subject shan't be mentioned. We'll have a jolly day, with nothing to bother us."

On the Friday afternoon he left them, and late on Saturday was in London.

Silas Beltervane was surprised that evening to find his daughter excellent company. But Eugenia was puzzled. She detected effort.

When the women were alone together, however, she spoke as if her reading had been the same as her husband's.

"Of course, dear, it's been uncomfortable for you. I can understand that you feel relieved. All the same," she said, "I miss him, and I believe you will too. He's such good company."

"Isn't he?" responded Clarissa.

Eugenia then ventured a little further.

"How *do* you feel about it all?" she asked.

Clarissa laughed.

"Almost exactly as I used to feel at sixteen," she replied, "when I'd finished the October number of a magazine story, and had to wait a whole month for November's."

CHAPTER XV

MIRIAM AT HOME

ON the Thursday—the day which he had promised Clarissa should be jolly and without care, and which had fulfilled his promise—Stephen Gambier had written to Miriam Lemesurier, warning her of the possibility that her name and address had been discovered by Vincent Urquhart. “I do not know,” he had said in conclusion, “to what extent you fear the man, but I think you ought to be told. I will explain how it came about when I see you. I do not telegraph, as there is always risk of the wrong reader.”

On the Saturday he found his chambers pleasant with a good fire, and a good dinner, ready as soon as he had bathed and dressed.

His friend Jermyn came in while he was drinking his coffee, and it was half-past nine o'clock before Stephen asked permission to look through the letters which he had refused to read before eating.

One was from Miriam, and consisted of just two lines.

“Friday night.

“Please come to me as soon as ever you can.

“MIRIAM.”

George Jermyn saw a cloud, of what nature he did not know, come over his friend's face; it was certainly neither anger nor petty annoyance.

“I've got to go out again,” said Stephen. “I'm sorry, George.”

Jermyn smiled.

"That smirk is redundant," said Stephen. "I'm not pretending I would leave you and this jolly fire for anything else."

"I'm sure she's worth it, Gambier. Put on a thicker coat than that, though," said the doctor. "It's a rotten night, and you've come from the sun."

"All right. You stay here as long as you like. There's whisky and cigars. But don't expect me before midnight."

"Sukie's gone to a theatre. She was to pick me up here," said Jermyn.

"I wish I could get back in time to catch her," replied Stephen, struggling into a heavy fur-lined coat. "I haven't seen the dear, merry thing for months. Give her my love."

The porter at the Fleet Street gate telephoned for a taxi, and Stephen, having lighted a cigar, stood talking to the man, who was an old friend, until it came.

"You went away, sir, looking like a shadow, if I may say so, after the Gateside election. While you're out there in France, we read of you breaking a collar-bone and being knocked out of time with a crack on the head, and now you turn up sudden on a nasty, drizzling Saturday night, looking fitter than ever."

"I've been walking, Stenhouse — walking day after day, and in good company. And they've got a sun out there," said Stephen.

In the cab carrying him westward, he thought of the sun, of the walking and of Clarissa's company. There came back to him the memory of his contradictory emotions when Miriam had spoken, in the railway station of Roque Brune, of Clarissa Beltervane.

His first feeling had been the desire to tell her the whole story of his intimacy with the girl; for what Miriam had called *the episode* had been so completely superseded in his consciousness by the almost sexless *camaraderie* of their later friendship, and Miriam had throughout their friendship so steadily increased his respect for her, that it had come to him only as a second thought how unseemly, if not impossible, would be a friendship between these two women,

should the younger ever render him the affection he purposed winning.

As his hope of Clarissa had increased, the problem had once or twice recurred in a different form: the dishonesty, on the one hand, of permitting, even if not encouraging, their acquaintance, while tacitly deceiving Clarissa as to the earlier phase of his with Miriam; the impossibility, on the other, of admitting anything to the detriment of Miriam in Clarissa's opinion.

Give him Clarissa, and he knew he would soon be in the mood to confess any fault of his own commission.

But Miriam?

It was not only that he would not betray Miriam socially; he could not feel, knowing her as he did, that Miriam had sinned. He was the sinner, who had loved the less.

Having postponed consideration of these matters, however, until at least he should be sure of the girl, he entered the woman's house at ten o'clock on the Saturday night of his return to London without any expectation of discussing his own affairs. He supposed that Miriam had sent for him to explain his letter, and to advise her, perhaps, on measures for avoiding the persecution of Vincent Urquhart.

As the parlour-maid opened the door, Miriam came out into the hall to meet him.

"You needn't sit up, Annie," she said to the girl. "I will let Mr. Gambier out."

"She's a new one, isn't she?" asked Stephen, when the servant was gone.

"Yes — since you were here last. I sent her to bed, because she's the only one left, and she's got to be up early."

"What d'you mean?" asked Stephen, vaguely alarmed. "You generally have a whole pack of servants."

"I'll explain soon," replied Miriam, and began to help him take off his heavy coat. "What a funny man you are," she said, "to wear a thing like this to-night. It's a wet night, certainly, but warm and stuffy."

"Jermyn was with me when I came out, and was fussing about me," he answered. "I feel half boiled."

In the drawing-room was a bright fire. Stephen looked at it and laughed. "How about my fur coat?" he asked.

"You know I always have a fire and wide-open windows in damp weather. Now, Stephen," she said, when they were seated, "can you guess why I was in such a hurry to see you?"

"My letter, I suppose," he replied.

"No — not exactly. Your letter only makes it necessary to talk to you a little sooner than if you hadn't written it."

"Anyhow," said Stephen, "I want to tell you what made me write it."

"Please do," said Miriam.

When he had told her of what had befallen him and Miss Beltervane on the previous Wednesday afternoon in the cottage of the man who had called himself Evans,

"There isn't a doubt," said Miriam, "that it's he. Your description would be enough. But that portrait of me was done by Sergentson a little while after we were married."

"Are you afraid of him — afraid, I mean, of violence?"

"I never thought about that. I so loathe the memory of the years when he was a kind of deadly atmosphere — a poison that I ate and drank and breathed," said Miriam, "that the thought of even seeing the man again is unbearable. If what he calls his religion has made him since then even madder than he was — well, yes, I shouldn't wonder if he might be dangerous. But I'm not going to give him a chance. I'm going away."

"Going away — when?"

"To-morrow."

"Where?"

"I'll let you know — in time. It is certainly on account of Vincent Urquhart that I'm going to-morrow. But anyhow I should have gone very soon — in a week or so, for a very different reason. That is what I want to talk to you about, Stephen dear."

Her face was colourless, her mouth had a kind of sternness; but Stephen, with a twinge of premonition, knew its hardness was not for him.

She rose and fetched a cigar box from some secret place.

"You like these, don't you?" she said. "Do smoke and be comfortable. I'm afraid I'm going to talk too much."

When his cigar was burning,

"I made up my mind to go away — a long way for a long time," she began, lying back in her chair with her clasped hands behind her neck, "after I said good-bye to you last Tuesday."

"Why?"

"I want you to marry that girl — Miss Beltervane. I only had one glance at her face, and saw her walk down the platform. But I want her to marry you. Do you?"

Stephen nodded with a decisive movement but impassive face.

"Does she?" asked Miriam.

"I don't know," said Stephen.

"Does she know you wish it?"

Once more he nodded his head.

"I've been wishing you to marry — the right woman. That means, of course, a lady with a brain and a heart. Somehow, the mere grace of Miss Beltervane convinced me that she was what I wanted for you, Stephen. Now, months ago, thinking of you and of how good you've been to me, I asked myself whether you wouldn't find yourself in a horrid position when this should happen. Most men wouldn't care, I know. But I tried to work out what you'd feel. I know you've never felt as men generally do to women like me."

He was suffering a painful oppression. Her manner, even gentler than her habit, filled him with a vague sense of some wrong or cruelty done.

"I will not have you speak so," he said. "There aren't any women like you."

She went on undeflected.

"I believed," she said, "that it would hit you like this: 'I can't tell her what Mrs. Lemesurier has been to me without telling her what we were to each other in the beginning.' To tell half is worse, isn't it, Stephen, than telling nothing?"

He did not answer.

"I am sure half a loaf is sometimes worse than no bread."

Still he would not respond.

"Oh!" she cried, "do answer. You're not a stone image, are you?"

"I'm listening," said Stephen.

"Perhaps you said to yourself: 'Miriam and this woman I have found would like each other — might love each other. It's impossible to play the straight game to both — hardly to either — if I let them meet each other on the usual terms.'"

She looked at him wistfully, shook her head as one resolving to put certain matters aside, and continued:

"So I made up my mind to go away. There are many who know of our friendship, Stephen; none of them must be able to hint that my going had anything to do with you and that beautiful girl. Is she beautiful, Stephen?"

"Sometimes," he answered.

"So I should have gone very soon, you see, even if this news about Vincent Urquhart had not come. Some day, when you've been married a long time, you shall, if you think it wise, tell her everything; and it shall rest with her whether we shall meet."

"But why ——" began Stephen.

"Oh, can't you see I just won't have you put in a false position? To let your wife know the woman who has been your mistress, and not let her know that she has been your mistress, is one thing you can't do. To expose me to criticism of any kind by breaking a friendship everyone knows about, is another thing you couldn't do. So there you are, and here I will not be. 'We never see Mrs. Lemesurier now — no, she lives at Naples, or Munich' — that's easy, and it's settled."

He could not answer her, and was ashamed.

"If there should be any question of my reasons — well, for once in a way, Vincent Urquhart will be useful. Probably I shall tell a select few all about him."

"Better not," said Stephen. And she saw the pain and

the troubled loyalty in his eyes, and understood, as not many women could, how his tongue was tied.

"Stephen, dear," she said softly, "you're not to be unhappy. I'm not unhappy. There are heaps of places I want to see — a few that I want to live in. We aren't very old. It'll come smooth in time, for I do believe you have drawn a first prize in that awful lottery. Oh, *but*," she cried, breaking off, "you're not even engaged yet, are you?" And then she laughed, openly deriding the notion that any woman could be sincere in such a hesitation.

"Theoretically — socially, I think we are," replied Stephen. "The father thinks so, and has told some people. But it is understood between her and me that she's to break the engagement as soon as ever she pleases, after we have seen each other again. I wish, Miriam, I could tell you what led to the formal engagement. I'm almost telling you — I believe you could make me tell. But I know you won't. If I could tell you, you'd believe yourself ever after an infallible judge of character by gait alone."

Her face brightened, and she settled herself more comfortably to her cushions.

"Well," she said, "you must just tell me all you can; about the girl herself, her family, and — oh! yes, particularly about how it was you got hurt. You rescued the mother, didn't you, from a motor smash?"

"Stepmother," said Stephen.

"Of course. I remember the newspapers being very full, eight or nine years ago, of Silas Beltervane's marrying one of his shop-girls. Is she possible?"

"Quite charming. Hardly over thirty, very pretty, and pleasant manners. The devotion of the two women to each other is — well, I suppose rather unusual, and very good to see."

He described Silas Beltervane to her, the accident, the visit of the Templeton Cuypers, the great thunderstorm in the hills; and it seemed that nothing he said lacked interest. From Silas they went to Silas's politics, and thence to Stephen's. Of Milroy's illness and approaching resignation

she was primed with the latest gossip, and Stephen found her comments on public affairs acute and as suggestive as ever. She dissuaded him strongly from deserting Gateside. "You must not let them use you, Stephen, as they do some of the rich duffers, to go on year after year putting up a fight in hopeless constituencies. You've done your bit of knight-errantry, and nearly pulled it off, too. This time you will. A sure seat, or Gateside again," she said. "And it comes to the same thing, doesn't it?"

They talked long; but behind all their words was a common sense of impending evil; Stephen feeling that she was saying all she could think of, in fear of something being left unsaid which might never be said if not said now; but Miriam knowing that what she wished most to say could not, on this night, get itself spoken.

At last she looked at the clock and rose.

"It's five minutes to twelve," she cried. "I do hope you'll find a taxi at once."

Telling him to stay where he was, she fetched his coat and hat from the hall. When the coat was on,

"It's no good opening the front door," she said, with a pale smile. She went to the French window, and drew back the heavy silk curtains. The window stood wide open to the narrow strip of grass and gravel which joined the front garden with the back. "You might go out this way," she said. "Less trouble — and I shan't have to shut — shut the door on you."

Her lips shook, and the man's heart melted to her unspoken sorrow. He was slow — slow because of the pain there is in knowing.

"If you're going to bed now," he said, "you'll have to shut that window. It's door enough for a burglar."

"I will shut it, Stephen," she answered patiently. "But I'm not going to bed yet. I'm not afraid — not even of the religious devil that was my husband."

"Why aren't you going to bed yet?" he asked.

"I've got a letter to write," said Miriam. "So you'd better go."

He shifted his hat to his left hand, holding out the right. She took it between the back of her left and the palm of her right.

"It's good-bye," she said. "You haven't kissed me for years."

She took his head in her hands and kissed his mouth softly with cold lips.

With a weight on his spirits, he reached the green door in the wall. Suddenly he remembered that the latch had not clicked, when he let the door swing back after it had been opened to his ring by the wire from the house. Yet now he had to pull back the spring bolt to which the wire was attached. This time he was careful to close it accurately behind him.

Outside was still the drizzle; but the air was warmer than when he had left the Temple.

Up and down the road he glanced. To the right of him shone the lamps of an approaching motor; to the left, the lantern of a policeman in a fit of curiosity.

On the chance of the motor being a cab and empty, Gambier stopped on the kerb, raising his hand. The policeman sympathetically flashed his bull's-eye on the driver, who promptly pulled up. Stephen told the man to take him to the Temple, thanked the constable, and was driven home.

CHAPTER XVI

THE LETTER THAT WAS WRITTEN

MIRIAM LEMESURIER, standing in the double-eaved window of her drawing-room, listened till she heard the stopping of the cab, the shutting of its door and Stephen's good night to the policeman. Then she drew the curtains almost together, and sat down to write.

Her letter was the complement of the evening's conversation. Now that he was gone, she could say it all. So for half an hour she wrote, only to read her letter over at the end of it and find out that the things which most need saying can never be said at all.

Before she began she had carefully addressed her envelope — writing as if she were transcribing the characters of some sacred script. Now she folded and enclosed her letter; and, when she had sealed it, looked round for a stamp. There was in her mind a childish desire to have it safe in the post. No delivery, truly, would reach any man in London before the Monday morning, but the red lips of the pillar-box are a type of the irrevocable. A letter written is a thing thought; a letter posted, a thought said.

The little stamp-box held a small sheet of six stamps and a single loose one. She picked up and laid down again the six; they were fresh-bought by the housemaid that evening. The single stamp had been lonely in the box for months; it was like her lonely self.

She stuck it on her envelope, pressed it down with her palm, laid the letter on the table and raised her eyes to the window, wondering whether she would get wet if she ran out as far as the pillar-box at the corner.

Between the curtains, two yards from the ground, she

saw, set in a white face, the small blue eyes of Vincent Urquhart.

She might have fainted from fear, had not her heart flamed with hatred and anger.

He strode into the room, closing the curtains carefully behind him. His step was almost noiseless. She glanced at his feet, and saw that he had woollen socks drawn over his heavy walking boots.

"I have come to fetch you," he said.

"Where?" asked Miriam.

"Home," he replied. "You sinned in leaving me. But my sin was no less — to let you go. It is written in the book of the prophet Jeremiah: 'If a man put away his wife, and she go from him, and become another man's, shall he return unto her again? Shall not that land be greatly polluted? But thou hast played the harlot with many lovers; yet return again to me, saith the Lord.' What Jehovah willed to a people, that will I do unto you."

"You wish me to come and live with you?"

"Yes. I will even enforce it," said Vincent Urquhart.

"You intend marrying me all over again?" she asked, her voice and face transfigured by the bitterness of her sarcasm.

"If you care," he answered solemnly, and with an approach to gentleness, "for a mere legal, finite recognition of the divine and immutable ordinance——"

"If it was immutable, why did you divorce me?"

"The weakness of my flesh pitied you," he replied.

"There was a man——"

Miriam broke into laughter, honest and terrible.

For a moment it puzzled, almost dazed him. Then,

"There was surely a man," he repeated, while his eyes questioned her.

"In those days there was one man only in all the world — the man who had made my life a horror to me — the man I hated — the man whose presence was a disease and his touch degradation."

"Will you dare to tell me," asked Urquhart, "that you

endured shame you had not earned, merely to escape your duty?"

"Duty!" she exclaimed bitterly. "You made me do worse than that."

"What?"

"You made me deny God, for fear of hating Him."

For a moment the man doubted himself.

"Perhaps I have erred in sternness. Come with me," he said, "and I will be tender with you."

"Your tenderness," she answered, "would make me kill myself. Even now I hate living, because you are near me."

"You are my wife," said Vincent Urquhart.

Miriam rose to her feet.

"The law says I am not. Go out of my house," she cried.

She went towards the door, but Urquhart reached it first. It had been in her mind to summon help by the telephone.

He locked the door and dropped the key into his pocket.

"I have come many miles for you," he said. "Tell me — if that first unchastity was a lie, how is it with you since?"

Miriam stared him in the eyes, and his anger mounted, because he could read in her face no sign of either guilt or innocence.

"I owe you no account of myself," she said at last.

"You dare not render a true one. I have been in your garden close upon an hour," he replied. "I could have killed your paramour as he passed me on his way to the door in the wall."

"How dare you use such words to me?" she demanded, blazing with anger.

"Dare you deny he is that?"

"I will not speak to you. If you do not leave me, I shall call for help."

"I have seen the man before. He let slip his knowledge of you, and then lied about it. I know his name, and I will find out what you are ashamed to tell."

The old sense of possession, the love he had felt for the slender girl in Jersey who had become the fiercely splendid woman defying him, and his elemental jealousy

of the man seen leaving her house at midnight, burst up together in a flood, to mingle with the vast superstitious egoism which gave what he thought religious sanction to his power over her. He took a step towards her.

The little table, drawn near the fire, at which she had been writing, was between them. His left hand rested on it as he opened his mouth to speak. But he felt her sealed letter beneath his fingers, and mechanically looked down as he shifted his support. His eyes were good, and he read the name. Then he cried out:

"You write to him the moment he leaves you."

He was exalted by passion to an aspect which for a moment shook Miriam with bodily fear; but it gave place to a stronger emotion; for Urquhart had taken the letter to Stephen Gambier in his right hand, and the thumb of his left was in act to break open the envelope.

On the table lay a pair of large scissors in a sheath. Miriam tore them free, and, savage from the heart outward, leapt at the man.

Urquhart caught her uplifted right wrist in his left hand, twisting the arm behind her. The scissors fell. His left fist, still holding the disarmed hand, was pressed between her shoulder-blades, forcing her body against his. In a tremendous effort to break away, she swung back from his grasp, pushing with her free hand against his chest. In answer, that terrible left hugged closer still. Forced towards what she hated, the woman showed a face grinning with disgust, a hazy moisture already on her lips. As her right hand struggled vainly to push him off, Urquhart was seized with the old blend of desire and cruelty which still does murder and fills mad-houses. The great hairy right hand came up with spread fingers; the palm lifted itself against the soft chin, and bore upward against the force of the retaining left hand in the hollow of the shoulders.

Miriam's last thought was: "He shall not make me scream."

And the hand under her chin rose with strength irresistible, so that opportunity of screaming was soon past.

The letter had fallen from his hand as she attacked him; but his thought even yet was of the letter and of what must be in it.

"Never again—never again!" he groaned, and drove the hand upward.

There was a clear, soft click somewhere. Its vibration ran through him with a thrill—and by degrees, slow at first, he felt the woman's body slacken in his arms to complete inertia.

Easily, after watching the face a while, he lifted and laid her, supine and straight, upon her sofa, drawing softly to her right side the arm he had crumpled so cruelly behind her back.

He knew she was dead; and he knew that in a certain moment he had meant to kill her.

Coming here, this certainly was not what he had intended; but, faithful to his own act and its impulse, he would not now tell himself that he had done what he did not mean to do.

He felt, rather, a sort of joy, looking down on the face of her, to think she had been his wife—to know that she could sin no more; and even vaguely felt that by killing he had cleansed her.

He went from the body, turned back to pull an edge of skirt over two inches of pathetic stocking, and, leaving her, picked up the letter for which she had died.

Once more he looked at the address; again slipped a thumb of curiosity under the half-broken triangular flap; changed his mind, dropped the letter into a pocket of his old tweed coat, lifted his cap from the floor, and went once more to what was left of that which he had killed.

Slowly he stooped over the face, till his lips were near to the kiss for which he had delayed his going. But some line of mouth or forehead reminded him of the hatred she had avowed and the disgust she had shown. Vincent Urquhart, before religion as he read it had hardened him, and love as he lost it had enraged him, had been a gentleman. Being now a murderer, the elder state yet prevailed

to a compromise: he laid the backs of his fingers to the cold lips, took the key from his pocket, unlocked the door, switched out the lights in hall and drawing-room, and slipped into the garden, parting for a moment, but not drawing the curtains he had closed so carefully fifteen minutes ago.

Outside he heard the resumed beat of a policeman's steps — as if the man had paused a moment just on the other side of the green door, and now continued his round.

It was eight o'clock of the Sunday morning when they found her.

Meantime, Vincent Urquhart, carrying with him a sense of something achieved, walked, with his long-striding limp, from Kensington to Croydon, where, before noon on the Sunday, he took train for Newhaven. On the Sunday night he was in Paris, and, some thirty hours later, having walked sixty kilometres after leaving his last train at Cuneo, he rolled into his own bed in the room above Sergeantson's portrait of Mrs. Vincent Urquhart.

CHAPTER XVII

THE NEWS AT LES NUAGES

THE "Terrible Tragedy in the West End," soon to be known as "The Campden Hill Murder," was not, of course, reported in the Sunday morning papers.

On Monday, 24th October, it was all over the world.

The Paris edition of *The Daily Mail* reached Les Nuages, as usual, about nine o'clock of that morning.

Her intercourse with Stephen Gambier had quickened Clarissa Beltervane's interest in public affairs. London, too, had grown more attractive since last Friday afternoon.

It chanced, however, that she had to content herself that morning with Saturday's *Times*. But after dinner, while Eugenia was at the piano, she found her father half asleep between a cigar and the English halfpenny paper published in Paris that very morning.

For her father she had felt, these last few days, a tender increase of affection. To see him so happy with Eugenia was in itself a pleasure; and she loved people, as she had told Eugenia in her bedroom on the Sunday morning, once for being themselves, and twice for being happy.

Seeing his sleepy show of reading the newspaper, she settled herself softly on the arm of Silas' chair.

"You alight, Clarissa," he said, "like a large butterfly. You want something."

"The news from town, please," she answered.

"Nothing happens on a Sunday, child," he said. "And this is practically a Saturday evening paper issued on a Monday. There's nothing in it but what we know already — except a new murder — and you won't care about that."

"Oh, I don't know," replied Clarissa lightly. "They're

awfully exciting sometimes — in books. Sordid and obvious, generally, aren't they, though, in the papers? And you nearly always know who did them."

"In detective tales," said her father, "it's 'find the murderer'; in the courts, it's generally 'fix the crime on him.'"

"And how hard they work, the learned and honourable counsel, to prove that he didn't — knowing all the time that he did."

Silas laughed. "Or vice versa," he admitted.

"I've been told that's quite right and just," she went on. "But I never can feel that it's decent, father."

"You can never really *know*, Clary. Therefore it's only fair —"

"Oh, yes, I admit all that. But I mean evidence can give you guesses and reasonings and arguments; but character can give you certainty. Traces and motives and *pièces de conviction* might make a man seem a villain, while all the time there'd be some people in the world who just knew he hadn't done it. I think they ought to be able to get hold of and use that kind of knowledge as well as all the rest. Then they'd be able to believe in the side they'd taken, and —"

"And convince nobody, little girl. What you want," said Silas, recognising Gambier's effect on his daughter, and flattered by the opening she gave him to play Gambier's understudy,—"what you want is the Archangel Michael to come down as spiritual witness. Now, under the existing dispensation, you can't subpoena him; and even if you could, he'd carry no conviction to a British jury. They'd resent him as a crank. And that'd be neither their fault nor his, but the fault of all the cranks since the year one. Inspiration, and divinely implanted intuition, my dear, being the two greatest forces, perhaps, that move the world, have seldom been claimed by those who had them; but they have been half perceived as a market value by so many rogues that the claim has queered the market for the genuine thing."

It struck Clarissa that her grey symphony of a father was a more interesting man than she had thought.

"The task set us, child, here below," he went on, encouraged by the gleam of her grey eyes, "is to work with what we have, inspired by what we have not."

"But suppose they said I'd killed somebody — say Eugenia, father — you would know I hadn't."

"I should believe that," replied Silas, "with a certainty that very likely I should call knowledge — a thing which others couldn't have. I couldn't get my belief in you into others, so I should get the cleverest man I could to find means of proving what I believed."

Clarissa seemed to shift her mental attention; for she said: "Fancy a murder in one's own family! Wouldn't it be horrible? The police, and the servants, and the doubts, and the doctors!"

Silas looked at her curiously.

"I don't mean a burglar," she went on. "No one from outside. Blood running from somebody you loved — and nobody likely — nobody able even to have done it but someone else that you loved. I wonder whether it'd be more awful in a little, poor house, than in a great big rich one."

"In the small house you'd escape the servants prying and whispering; but the neighbours would have their heads out of every door and window all up and down the street," said Silas. "And the children, most likely, would have seen it all, and there'd be no other room perhaps, to go to. You'd have to clean up yourself, and pour it down the kitchen sink ——"

"Don't, father!" cried Clarissa. "That's horrid of you. Have you ever known anyone," she asked, after a moment's silence, "that did, or wanted to do a thing of that sort?"

Very softly he answered her.

"I knew a man who very nearly did," he said, thinking of himself; and Clarissa, by the dull flush on the face, knew the mistake she had made. She had forgotten all about the automatic pistol.

But even as she changed the subject, she reflected that her very clumsiness should convince him that she had never seen what he had in his hand when he found her in Stephen Gambier's arms.

"Tell me about this one," she said. He looked at her blankly. "The murder, I mean," she explained, caring nothing for any murder, but only for the fading of the redness from the grey face.

Glad to cover his own discomfort,

"It's mysterious enough, so far — if mystery's what you want," he said; "just a poor woman dead — probably killed by some brute of a man. But no clue to him."

"How do they know it was a man?" asked Clarissa, mechanically; she was not yet interested.

"By the way it was done — the force that must have been used," he answered. "The neck was broken."

"Couldn't it have been accident?"

"The body was laid out straight and tidy on a sofa," said Silas. "She couldn't have done that after falling and breaking her neck, and have no other mark on her save a broken finger-nail."

"A poor woman might have broken her nails in a hundred different ways," objected Clarissa.

"This woman had manicured fingers. One nail was bent back and broken. And she wasn't a poor woman."

"You said 'poor,' father — from pity, I suppose. Then it's a case of inquisitive flunkeys and polite policemen — not of neighbours agog on the doorsteps," said Clarissa.

"There are so many shades, my dear," he replied, "between Grosvenor Square and Haggerston. But most Campden Hill houses are pretty well secluded from each other."

"Campden Hill!" exclaimed Clarissa. And she remembered that Stephen had said the beautiful woman of the portrait lived on Campden Hill.

Silas nodded. "Hillside, the house is called," he said. "I rather think I remember it. There's a gate or door in the wall, and cedars."

"What was her name, father?" asked the girl, some queer fancy in her forerunning knowledge.

"Lemesurier," said Silas; and turned in astonishment at the exclamation which came from his daughter. Eugenia heard and came running across the great room.

"What is it? Did you know the woman?" asked Silas, alarmed. And,

"What's the matter, darling?" cried Eugenia, in the same moment.

Clarissa was white — frightened and shocked. In a few words Silas explained the matter to his wife.

"And then Clary cried out," he said in conclusion, while Eugenia devoured the account in the paper. "I suppose she knows this Mrs. Lemesurier, or something about her."

"I didn't know her. I saw her once — last Tuesday — in the station at Roque Brune. I know nothing about her, but that she was a friend of Mr. Gambier's," said Clarissa.

Silas had an opinion, not inexcusable, that people who get themselves murdered are seldom respectable.

"I hope," he said, "that Gambier didn't introduce you."

"There wasn't time. She was in a train that only stopped two minutes. He told me she was an old friend, who had helped him to get a start. It's terrible!"

"Because she was Stephen's friend, d'you mean?" asked Eugenia tenderly.

"Of course I'm sorry for that. And it's terrible to think of anyone you knew being killed — killed on purpose," said Clarissa.

"You didn't know her, child — you have just said you didn't," cried Silas — almost ill-temperedly, thought his wife.

"I should have known her some day," said Clarissa, forgetting the insecurity of her relation to Stephen Gambier.

"Why?" asked her father.

"She was Stephen's friend, and almost — yes, I think quite the most beautiful person I've ever seen," said the girl; and Silas saw the tears running down her cheeks.

"Well, well," he murmured, soothing her, "the name's

not so very uncommon. Perhaps it's a different woman."

"She had a house on Campden Hill, and she was Mrs. Lemesurier."

Eugenia was at the newspaper again.

"A woman of very remarkable beauty," she read aloud; "a brunette, finely proportioned, and of graciously commanding carriage."

Silas, though he hardly yet knew why, was annoyed.

"That," he said sneering, "is what a penny-a-lining reporter guessed from a corpse in a darkened room on a Sunday afternoon, after he'd bribed a policeman to let him peep through a half-opened door."

"Then that reporter's a genius," said Clarissa, wiping her eyes, and gathering self-control from the querulous antagonism of her father's voice. "For it's Mrs. Lemesurier exactly."

Silas, vague in his vexation, and wishing to smooth out any roughness, brought her from the coffee-tray a liqueur-glass of brandy. To please him she sipped at it.

"Besides," she continued, "there was the——" and stopped, remembering her promise not to speak of the picture at Major Evans' cottage. "No—nothing," she said, when they asked explanation. "But to-morrow I shall telegraph to Mr. Gambier."

"What for?" asked Silas.

"To know if—if it really is," she answered.

"I beg you will do nothing of the kind," Silas expostulated.

"My *dear* father!" exclaimed Clarissa; and beamed down upon him with an expression of benevolent surprise.

The conviction that he had spoken foolishly did nothing to remove Silas Beltervane's uneasiness.

"Do as you please, child," he said. And, before they parted for the night, he told her tenderly that he hoped it would prove a mere absurd coincidence of names. "You know, my dear," he added, "there aren't as many beautiful women in the world as reporters find in the witness-box and the dock."

That night Clarissa dreamed of the woman she had seen looking out of the train, of the great picture of her in the cottage hidden in the hills, and of the man who lived with the picture.

She was out of the house next morning before seven o'clock. A reasonable but unreasoned desire to know whether the man Evans were at home, sent her over the ground she had last travelled with Stephen; and she admitted to herself that she missed him.

Creeping cautiously beside the track, and taking advantage of rock and tree for cover, she came in sight of the cottage.

It was even now barely eight o'clock. The whole front of the house had the appearance of being sealed.

"He's not at home—perhaps not in France," she was telling herself, when the door was flung open, and Vincent Urquhart, dressed slovenly, with an air of having slept in his clothes, came out into the patch of ground between the house and the pathway. He gazed down the valley towards the low sun. It shone in his eyes, so that he shaded them with one of his big hands, looking under it, she thought, as if for some person expected to seek him in his house.

Clarissa was glad she had hidden herself; gladder when he turned his back and went indoors again.

She sped homeward, hoping he would not return until she was out of sight, yet daring never to look back, lest her very glance should betray the interest she would not have him suspect.

Safe in the Roman Road,

"He is there now," she said to herself. "But he might have been somewhere else two days ago."

At home, she remembered she was fasting, and drank her coffee on the terrace, eating four *croissants* in place of the customary two. The under gardener who had first given her information about "the mad English" passed within reach of her voice.

"Alessandro," she said; for she knew he came from the other side, speaking indifferently bad Italian and worse

French, and preferring the first; "Alessandro, tell me how do they call the woman who washes, sweeps and cooks for *il Inglese pazzo*?"

He told her the woman was married to Pietro Giovanelli — "Italian, like myself, signorina, being of those whose dream is 'A Nizza'—and they live a mile this side of Gorbio, on the wretched terraces of their washed-out old olive-shelf."

"Fetch her to the tower at four o'clock this afternoon, Alessandro. I will pay her for coming, and, if she tells me what I want to know, I will pay her much more. But if any soul in the world except her, me and you know what I have asked you and her, my father shall take another second gardener."

"Then, signorina," said Alessandro, smiling, "there will be two second gardeners at Les Nuages."

"*Pas du tout*," said Clarissa, losing her Italian. "*Cen'est pas raisonnable, ça!*"

Alexandre showed as many as possible of his beautiful teeth, touched his cap in pleasing imitation of Stokes the chauffeur, and withdrew.

Between now and four o'clock were many hours. Should she, or should she not, Clarissa demanded of herself, drive into Mentone and telegraph to Stephen?

Her father had tried to forbid it. She had never disobeyed him. Why was it, then, that his very objection seemed a reason for sending a message to the man who had said that he loved her? Until she had heard of the horrid thing which had been done in London in the neutral hours between Saturday and Sunday, her feeling had been merely that since he had offered himself—given himself—Stephen, in some ill-defined measure, belonged to Clarissa Beltervane. But now, the ugly news in the paper had made it seem at once a certain thing that Clarissa Beltervane belonged to Stephen Gambier. Here again she failed to define the quality and extent of the possession, but had proceeded at once to act as if Stephen Gambier's smallest interest was her own immediate and pressing concern.

Thus it came about that, though her own anxiety and the opposition of her father both urged her to send that telegram, she yet refrained from sending it. For, she reasoned, if it were indeed Stephen's friend that was killed, there would be trouble enough for him, poor man! — anger, grief, and perhaps a duty of revenge. She would not add the annoyance of foolish questioning. If it were not the woman he had spoken of, then it was but a few days waiting to hear the good news.

But somehow she was convinced that Stephen's friend it was. There was about the splendid picture and the terrific man who spent his days with it an atmosphere of tragedy so enigmatic that it seemed impossible to doubt their relation to the beautiful woman found dead in her drawing-room last Sunday morning.

Meantime, then, until she learned more from the papers or from Stephen, she would find out from the wife of Pietro Giovanelli what Major Evans had been doing between the afternoon of 19th October, when she and Stephen had drunk the man's tea, and this morning of 25th October, when she had seen him come out of his house to gaze down the pathway so little trodden.

But she did not forget that she had promised secrecy in regard to Major Evans, Mrs. Lemesurier and the Sergeantson painting. So here she was, once more engaged in a course of subterfuge; and, faithfully though she meant to follow it rather than break her word, Clarissa felt herself once again out of harmony with her habit.

Very discreetly Alexandre the gardener brought to the watch-tower the wife of his friend Giovanelli. Her name was Benedetta, and she came, if the signorina cared to know, from Pigna, up the valley of the Nervia. Oh, yes! For three years, or it might be even four, had she washed, swept, and upon occasion cooked for the Englishman at the little stone house not more than a mile from her own. He was a man assuredly of strange customs, this Englishman. It was little he paid her — some few francs a week, merely; but the money was regular, and paid even for the

days, which were many, when he would be away walking. Walk? Indeed, yes. There never was such another for walking. Days it would be sometimes that he was out in the hills, with his limp, his heavy boots, his little knapsack and his stick.

Questioned more particularly about Major Evans' movements of the last five days, Benedetta showed a moment's suspicion. Whatever her scruples, however, the promise of payment, which had been conveyed by her husband's friend the gardener, prevailed in the end. She was sure they could not, even if they wished, do so stern and solitary a man any harm. Yes, he had left his house early on the Thursday, for though the bed had been used on the Wednesday night, he was gone when Benedetta arrived at ten o'clock.

"Don't you get his breakfast?" asked Clarissa.

The woman smiled, showing many teeth.

"He cannot drink coffee like a Christian," she replied. "And he thinks that none can boil his tea but himself. Besides, he is abroad always with the sun. I have first to tend my own, and then walk the best part of the road from Gorbio."

"I see," said Clarissa. "Well, was he at home next day — on the Friday, I mean?"

"That, signorina, is what I cannot tell, because it is the rule that when he is off on his walking I do not return to tend his house until he leaves word at my house that he is come back."

"But how should you know whether he is gone or not? He might be out for a stroll — just over the ridge, perhaps, to return in an hour or so."

"If he missed me, he would send or come. Moreover," said the woman, "there is his little knapsack. If I doubt, I look for the little bag with the shoulder-straps. If it be gone, he is with it."

Not until this very morning, it appeared, about two hours after Clarissa had seen him open his front door, had the hermit appeared at Giovanelli's house, and Benedetta had followed him back to his own. No, it was not unusual

that he should be away so long. The bed was disordered, as if one had lain upon it, yet not between the sheets. Oh, yes, the signorina might be assured this conversation would not be repeated to the English gentleman; for it was a thing very certain that she would lose her employment, if he knew she had discussed these matters with a stranger. And the weekly francs, if few, were regular, and not to be despised.

For the inside of five days, then, the man had been away. Clarissa set down on a sheet of notepaper the gist of her conversation with Benedetta Giovannelli; for she did not think Stephen Gambier the man to let the killer of his friend go unpunished; and she remembered his fear that this Evans might have picked up from her mouth the words that would tell him where the dead woman was living.

That morning's *Mail* contained many new words, but not a single new fact about the murder; the inquest was announced for Thursday, 27th October — just two days hence.

But at tea, after Benedetta was gone, there came to his daughter and wife, Silas, fresh from Mentone, with a French newspaper which contained one new thing.

"There's no doubt, Clary," he said, "that it is the same woman you saw at Roque Brune. Somehow they've found out that she returned to London from the Riviera only last Friday."

"I hadn't any doubt of it, father dear," replied Clarissa. "The *Mail* says the inquest will begin on Thursday. So on Friday, I suppose, we shall know all about it."

Silas was annoyed by this murder and its effect upon his family. It ought to be impossible that his women should be affected even remotely by so sordid a scandal.

He had told his daughter yesterday that he was glad Mr. Gambier had not introduced her to Mrs. Lemesurier. But in his heart he now discovered anger against the man for a friendship which must not be extended to Clarissa.

"I really cannot see," he said primly, "that the crime is any concern of ours. As a puzzle or as a problem in

human nature, a murder, so long as it comes no nearer to us than the newspapers can bring it, may have its interest. But there's no sense, my child, in making a personal matter of it, just because you once had the ill-fortune to see the victim."

"It was good fortune to see so beautiful a person," said Clarissa, gravely. "And the matter was terribly personal for her. The extent of my interest will have to be measured by Mr. Gambier's."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE NEWS IN TOWN

WHEN he left Miriam, Stephen Gambier had intended, on reaching his chambers, to write his first letter to Clarissa Beltervane.

He got into an old smoking jacket, lit a fresh cigar, poured himself a moderate drink, and sat down to ink and paper with a sense of pleasant expectation. Then the iridescent bubble of the mood which had grown so splendid in the cab was suddenly shivered.

It was not trouble of mind about the future relations of these two women which had spoiled his happy humour; for that difficulty Miriam herself had simply and unselfishly solved. Nor was there in him any sense of a Miriam ill-used and deserted; for there had never, indeed, been anything in his conduct to her with which he could blame himself, who was always, he thought, his hardest judge. And it was not compunction for a passion of six weeks, exhausted three years ago, so far as he was concerned, which clogged the pen he held ready for writing his first love-letter to the first woman who had been sufficiently difficult of approach to move him to the extreme of desire.

Anything against himself a man should surely tell, or allow to be told to the woman he asks to marry him; anything, that is, which can be told without injury to another. When the right time came, Clarissa, whose charity and width of comprehension he held, upon grounds perhaps insufficient, to be among the first of her merits, should be told that he was not — at least, for a season had not been — immaculate in respect of that virtue which was to count first between them; and that would be an end of it. Yet

the resolution thus to put himself "on side" did nothing to make the writing of that first letter more easy.

It was barely more than half-past twelve on the Sunday morning when he sat down to write.

It was half-past one when he told himself that it was Miriam's face which came between paper and pen. It had held something unsaid — something, he felt, that she would write to him afterwards. "That will be about feelings," he told himself — not thinking lightly of Miriam's emotions, but going on in his mind to the other untold thing that he had found in her face. It was the shadow of something — something coming.

Suddenly he laughed aloud at his own folly — and laughed not quite heartily.

"I'm superstitious — superstitious for the first time in my life," he thought.

Then his laughing mood broke: the shadow was a real one. There was another face that he remembered — the face of Vincent Urquhart, carrying the tea-tray.

His conscience, whatever its discomforts, could not throw Major Urquhart in his teeth. But somehow, although Miriam had sought him, and not he her; though the older and illicit relation had been superseded by friendship of a kind, he supposed, very rare, and certainly elevating; somehow he yet knew himself, perhaps on account of that older bond wherein he had in a measure forgotten the sisterhood, to be Miriam's keeper.

To-night he had left her alone. He thought of Vincent Urquhart and his blue eyes with the pin-point of madness in them; and he was afraid.

His first letter to Clarissa, who, in his disability to write, seemed more than ever Clarissa, must be spontaneous, of himself, and yet of the deepest cunning. For, first of all things in the universe, Clarissa was that which must not be lost, nor in any measure foregone. A moment of tragical farce had set him in a strangely artificial relation to the girl — as one used to read in boyhood of the man and

maid upon some lonely island, cut off from the world. From a distant admiration of her person this forced companionship, which was at first an unwilling alliance in a necessary conspiracy, had driven the man into love such as he had hardly until now believed in; while the girl had passed from an active antagonism through many stages of friendly interest into that wavering condition of mind which Stephen, for all his recurring fears, could hardly doubt was the forerunner of surrender.

The letter must be written, then, in a happier mood.

He slept late, and made lunch his breakfast. The day was fine, with a melancholy autumn sun, which drew him out and up the Embankment, from which he turned aside to the Adelphi. There, in her flat in John Street, Sukie Jermyn gave him tea, and tried to get out of him more than the particulars of his broken collar-bone, asking him many questions about the Beltervanes.

"But I heard from Mollie Weston, at La Turbie," she said, when he persisted in putting her off, "that you were engaged to the daughter."

"My dear Sukie," replied Stephen, "I wish I were. I believe I almost am. But be good and don't talk about it, till I can tell you yes or no."

As he walked back to his chambers, he felt himself inconsistently gratified—as if, somehow, the gossip had strengthened his claim on Clarissa.

He dined alone, his head full of her words, his heart of her sweetness. After dinner he wrote the letter he could not write before.

Read over, he found it good. As a letter to a girl whose mind was divided, he thought it struck just the right note, with its restrained ardour, and its avoidance of assurance on the one hand and obsequiousness on the other.

He enveloped and sealed it, stuck on the stamps, and then, after all, decided not to post it till the morrow. For Clarissa had promised that she would write on the Saturday, and the prudent man, tremulous in his love as if he

had been ten years younger, determined to keep his letter over night, and to settle its fate by the tone of hers which he was sure to receive in the morning.

Once more, before sleeping, he thought of Miriam and Vincent Urquhart.

"Oh, well," he told himself, "she is safely away in her car by this. And the man, much as he might have annoyed her, if he'd followed the clue we gave him, couldn't really have done her any harm."

Next morning at breakfast he read how death had reached the first woman that had loved him.

Clarissa's letter had come; its kind, rather stiff words, in the pretty handwriting, half daunted, half excited him; and the final sentence: "I went for a long walk this morning, and I missed you very much indeed," quickened his pulse with a stab of joy.

He laid down the little cold letter with its bright gleam shining through the ice, and opened his paper.

The first bald account in *The Morning Post* was like a spear thrust into his breast; the second, in *The Daily News*, was a turning of the blade in the wound, bringing belief.

He rose to his feet in pain literally physical, as he stood trying to think, resisting the inevitable, there came a step on his stair, and George Jermyn burst into the room.

Jermyn had known her, and Stephen read knowledge of Miriam's death in the sound of his feet outside the door; so that, the man's face telling the same tale, there was no need of preliminaries.

Jermyn saw the newspapers where they had fallen.

"Only just read it?" he asked.

Stephen nodded.

"Was that where you went on Saturday night?" asked Jermyn. And Stephen nodded again, divining what had never before crossed his mind: that his friend had guessed — guessed wrong, perhaps — much more than he had ever been told.

"I wish to God you had stayed at home," said Jermyn.

But Stephen said, remembering her goodness to him, and breaking his heart for the beauty and the kindness that were gone into the dark:

"I thank God, George, that I did go."

George checked his answer; the time was not come, and might not come for it. Instead,

"What's the next thing, Gambier?" he asked.

"See my solicitor, go to the police and tell 'em how and when I left her; see her — and wait for the inquest."

"Have you any idea who did it?" asked Jermyn.

"If there has been no robbery," began Stephen, and checked himself. "No," he said, "it's best not to talk vaguely."

He walked over to Carey Street, Jermyn leaving him in Fleet Street. Mr. Hidges saw him at once.

The old lawyer was shocked and horrified to such a degree that it was some time before Stephen could get him away from surmise and lamentation. He had felt an old man's affection for Miriam Lemesurier. She had always amused and been kind to him, and he would go now and again to her evening receptions, where he met people, clever and sometimes distinguished, of another world than his own. He had, moreover, twice quarrelled with his wife because she would never accompany him.

At last Stephen told him of Major Evans and the portrait of Miriam.

"Yes. That's Urquhart," said Hidges.

"How do you know about him?" asked Stephen.

"He writes to us periodically, demanding her address. Encloses thick letters, which we have orders to glance at and destroy," said Hidges. "I used to do that for her myself."

"Did you write to him as Evans?"

"For the last three years — ever since he's been at that place where you saw him — yes."

"What made him change his name?"

"I fancy he had it in his head that he was somehow disgraced by his action in setting her free. He'd some very

queer notions. Last year there was a good deal of correspondence. The dear lady, you see, thought he'd lost some money in the Pall Mall Bank failure, and she used us to try and persuade—well, almost trick him into taking some money which really came from her. He was too sharp, and it was no good. And yet she hated him!"

Hidges blew his nose violently.

"And you're afraid that he picked up her name and address from what Miss Beltervane said when she saw the picture?" he asked.

"It's possible—probable," replied Stephen.

"Then, if I were you, Gambier," said the old lawyer, "I'd go at once to the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard and tell 'em about Saturday night, and all you know about Major Urquhart. They'll have the proper inquiries made about his movements since last Wednesday much quicker than you and I can. Perhaps it'd be a good thing, too, for me to write to the Consul at Mentone. It's a man called Rendal—a very sensible fellow."

"I know him," said Stephen.

"I might ask him, for my satisfaction as a friend of Mrs. Lemesurier, to make a few inquiries, strictly discreet, so that we can check what Scotland Yard gets out of the French Police."

A little later, just before Stephen left him,

"All the same, you know," said Hidges, shaking his head, "I don't believe we shall find it was the husband."

In his cab, driving to Westminster, Stephen remembered the green door, which he had forgotten to latch as he entered Miriam's front garden on the Saturday night, and how he had found it latched as he went out.

"Then the man, whoever he was," thought Stephen, "must have been there waiting till I went away."

Upon this thought, the hideous thing which had befallen him, it seemed, rather than Miriam, grew more monstrous than ever. All that he might have done, had he been fully instead of half awake to her danger; all that she had been *to him*, all that she might have been to him, had she not,

as he suspected, loved him even more than she hated marriage; all her wisdom, gentleness and beauty rose up and seemed woefully to accuse him — him, who had said to himself that there was no fault of his in any sadness which might come across their friendship!

The news at first had stunned him, so that, even while he should have been mourning her, he would now and again of old pleasant habit say to himself that he must ask Miriam this or that, in reference to the very crime which had put Miriam where she could help him never any more.

But now, the place of the blow which had stupefied was beginning to ache, ever more stringently with the passing of the hours and days.

The pain was worse, he thought, and certainly different, from that caused by the natural death of even the closest intimate.

There was a little mirror in the cab, in which, just before alighting, he caught sight of his own face. And it crossed his mind, in a bitter kind of humour, that to carry such a countenance into Scotland Yard was to court suspicion.

His card secured him immediate admission to one of the Assistant Commissioners of Police.

It chanced that Stephen had met the man at dinner, less than a year ago, and both remembered.

"I think," said the Assistant Commissioner, as they shook hands, "that I know what you have come to see me about. It's poor Mrs. Lemesurier, isn't it?"

Stephen nodded.

"We've had a taxi-driver here already. You live in the Temple, don't you? Well, just tell me what time he took you up."

"About midnight — not more than three minutes past, anyhow," replied Stephen.

"Set you down at Inner Temple Lane, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"What time?"

"About twenty-five past," said Stephen. "At least, after I'd got into my chambers, changed my jacket and lighted a cigar, I sat down to write a letter, and I looked at the clock as I began it. It was twenty-five minutes to one."

"The chauffeur spoke the truth, then," said Sir Robert Lestock. "Now you talk, and tell me all about it."

"I wish I could," said Stephen; and told him all that he had told to Herman Hidges.

"We'll see to Major Urquhart. It's a possibility — but I don't think he's the murderer. Meantime, Mr. Gambier, there's nothing more you can do," said Sir Robert kindly. "I read somewhere that your health was 're-established.' Awful things do happen to one's liver and lungs in the daily press, don't they? But, honestly, you look as if it'd been something worse. Go home and rest, if you're wise. You'll be wanted for the inquest, of course."

"When?"

"Thursday, I think."

"I'm going to — to see her. Can you tell me, Lestock, where they've —"

Sir Robert lifted his telephone receiver. After a minute's conversation of which Stephen heard little and heeded nothing,

"Her own drawing-room still," said Lestock. "Morgenstern's been in Scotland. He's on his way back. He's the nearest thing we have in this wicked age to the detective of the novelette. I don't expect much, but I wanted him to find things as they were."

He scribbled on the back of a card, and gave it to Stephen.

"If you show them that, they'll leave you free to go where you please," he said. "But you'll go home afterwards, won't you?"

Hardly had the door closed on his guest, when Sir Robert was again at the telephone.

"I want Morgenstern directly he arrives," he said.

"He's here now, Sir Robert," came the answer.

"Send him up quick, then."

When the man stood before him,

"I want you to go out to Campden Hill — Hillside, the house is called — the Lemesurier murder, you know. You've got the facts?"

"Yes, Sir Robert," said Morgenstern.

"Everything's been left undisturbed for you. Go at once. I have just given permission to Mr. Stephen Gambier to view the body. An old friend of the deceased."

"I saw him go out just now, sir," said Morgenstern.

"Well, I want you to keep an eye on him. He's been ill, and he's badly cut up over this. Be civil to him — and you might find him useful. He knows something of Mrs. Lemesurier's affairs."

If she had just died as other women die, thought Stephen Gambier, looking down at the pale face which had glowed so often under his eyes — if she had died a death, slow or sudden, of disease or accident — gone out by any other road than that of hate and passion, he would have mourned her with a wound which heals with so gentle a slowness that a day comes at last when the fingers light upon it to find only the scar. But his hurt was gangrened with anger and desire of revenge. The destruction, the waste, the futility of all premature death was there; and added to them, the malice of the purpose, the cruelty of the deed, and the possibility at least of retaliation.

Then for a moment he threw the bitterness behind him, and looking for the last time on her beauty, forced himself to remember the last interview.

She had kissed him at the end; he remembered her words, and the coldness of her lips.

Working backward, he recalled her saying that she had a letter to write. Had she written before the end?

He turned to look round the room, and saw, standing between him and the door, a smooth, quietly dressed man, with features somewhat Jewish, and very dark, quick eyes.

"Are you from Scotland Yard?" asked Stephen in a low voice.

"Yes," answered the man as softly. "You are Mr. Gambier, I think?"

"How d'you know that?"

"Sir Robert said I should perhaps find you here," replied Morgenstern. "He said you might be able to help me."

"Come into the other room," said Stephen.

When Morgenstern had closed the door on the death-chamber,

"I have just remembered something," said Stephen. "You may have heard that I was here with Mrs. Lemesurier till about midnight on Saturday."

"If you are the gentleman that was driven in a taxi to the Temple," replied the detective, "I have. Let's go in here, sir."

And he led the way into the dining-room. Stephen shut the door.

"I have just recalled this," he said: "two minutes before I left her, Mrs. Lemesurier told me that she intended writing a letter."

"Sunday morning — no post out till Sunday midnight. It would be, sir, I should think, one of those letters," said Morgenstern, "which require a suitable mood to get written. She would be writing then, because she felt like it, I mean, rather than because time was pressing."

"Perhaps — if she did write. She told me that she was going out of town, though, on the Sunday morning. But I have told you, because I want you to find out whether she did or did not write a letter after I left."

"I'll do my best, Mr. Gambier. Do you think it would contain anything bearing on the case, that letter?"

"I think it probable, though Mrs. Lemesurier did not say so, that the letter she intended writing was a letter to me. We had discussed some private matters, and I had a feeling at the time that she found difficulty in saying all she wanted to say. Afterwards it occurred to me that she was disposed, when she spoke of writing, to take that means of exhausting the subject. If I am right, and the letter

was written, it is not likely that it'd help you in finding the murderer. But it would probably contain matter of much value to me. If it was written to someone else—well, it's impossible to say."

The police constable on duty in the hall tapped on the door.

"Inspector Filson's come, sir," he said to Morgenstern. "It's he that was here first on Sunday."

When Filson was with them and the constable gone, and a few words from Morgenstern had explained Gambier's anxiety to know whether Mrs. Lemesurier had written a letter,

"If you left the lady at midnight," said Filson, "I think she did write something, sir, before she died. Will you tell me where the little table was standing when you went away, Mr. Gambier?"

"Come back to the drawing-room," said Stephen.

And there, with voice lowered in reverence for the dead form outlined beneath the white cloth, Police-Inspector Filson explained himself.

But first he pointed to the small table, which had been drawn near the fireplace. Stephen crossed the room, and stood near the front window.

"Here," he said.

"When I first examined the room yesterday morning," Filson began, "it stood where you see it. But it had evidently been almost upset. The blotting-pad, some clean envelopes and some sheets of paper lay on the floor. This large pair of scissors I found lying flat, but the points driven into the carpet. They were dropped, I believe, from a greater height than the table, and I think stood upright, until, in a struggle which followed, they were trodden upon and pressed to the ground, lifting slightly the carpet they had perforated. Before you finish with this room, Mr. Morgenstern, you'd better take up the carpet; I think you'll find that the points of the scissors have lifted even a splinter of wood from the floor-board they stuck in."

"Where did they fall from?" asked Morgenstern.

"From the lady's hand, I believe. I'm only guessing, sir," he continued, turning to Stephen. "But the right forearm is bruised. Perhaps Professor Breitmann will help us there, when he comes. I think her arm was forced behind her back."

"But the writing?" said Stephen, sick and impatient.

Filson stooped, pointed to a pen-holder, lying a few feet from the scissors.

"That," he said, "has been stamped upon also. And the nib had wet ink on it—wet ink, but already drying, when it was crushed down upon the carpet. See the blot."

The three men stooped low, and could see plainly, as Filson delicately moved the broken pen-holder, how the pale green of the carpet was stained with ink in the form of the nib—ink which had not run into the wool, but had stuck to the surface of the pile.

"There's another curious bit of evidence, bearing on this supposed letter," said Filson. "I was questioning the maid-servant about her mistress's movements on Saturday. Amongst other things I asked her if she had written letters during the day. The girl hadn't seen her writing, but was sure she had intended doing so, because, after dinner, when she brought the coffee into the drawing-room, Mrs. Lemesurier had looked into the silver stamp-box on the writing-table in the window, and had said: 'Annie, I have only one penny stamp left.' So Annie ran out, and, being too late for the post office, had got six penny stamps at The Blue Posts—all they could give her. I've been to the public-house since, and they remembered giving her the stamps, because she's the sort of nice girl that doesn't often go in there."

Here Filson went over to the window and picked up a small silver box, holding it out to Morgenstern.

"The six stamps from The Blue Posts are here, right enough," said the detective. "But the odd one is gone." He went to the foot of the couch.

"I think," said Filson, "that it was on the letter."

"Do you ask me to believe," said Stephen, "that she went out herself and posted it?"

"No," replied Morgenstern, coming back to them. "There is no mud on the shoes. It was a wet night."

"Where is it, then?"

Filson had his idea, and said so; but asked for Morgenstern's.

"How would this do?" he asked: "suppose a letter had been written and lay on the table; suppose somebody comes in, who may, for anything we know, have seen Mr. Gambier go away; suppose he sees on the table a letter, stamped and addressed — a letter which increases some ill-feeling already entertained. I somehow cannot *see* a woman picking up a pair of scissors to defend herself from attack; but I can easily imagine her attacking with them. I think the visitor threatened to open the letter, and the lady went for him with the first weapon she found — and the rest followed."

"That's something of my notion," said Filson. "If it's right, the man who killed her took the letter with him."

"Yes. But it's pure theory," said Morgenstern.

In the hall, Stephen thanked the two men for their courtesy, and took leave of them. Standing on the steps they saw the green door in the garden wall close after him.

"The theory seems to me good," said Morgenstern, "if the letter was really addressed to Mr. Gambier."

"And if it was addressed to someone else?" asked Filson.

"Mr. Gambier is much interested in the letter," replied Morgenstern. "Come to think of it, Inspector, we have no reason but his own word for supposing it was written to him."

Filson's mind, if logical, was slow.

He began to work out the implication aloud.

"If there was a letter, it might be to Mr. Gambier. If it was to Mr. Gambier, another man might do murder

rather than give it up. But if it was written to another man, the man who wanted to steal it might have been — Morgenstern, how long would it take a taxi to get from here to the Temple and back?”

“Can’t say. But when Professor Breitmann’s done here, and we’ve finished locally, we’ll make the experiment,” said Morgenstern.

CHAPTER XIX

CLARISSA ON THE INQUEST

By the morning's post on Wednesday, 26th October, Clarissa Beltervane received her first letter from Stephen Gambier. It was not the letter he had written on the Sunday night, but ran as follows:

"MY DEAR CLARISSA,—It was good in you to write to me. I was glad to get your kind, if rather formal little letter. I was glad, also, to see your handwriting, which I think is rather like you. And nothing better could be said of it.

"This is not my first letter to you. I wrote a long screed on Sunday night. For some reason or other I deliberately put off posting it; I was afraid, I think, that you might not like it, and wanted to read it again with a morning judgment. But I have not had the heart to look at it again—because on the Monday morning I read in the paper what I dare say you read almost as soon: how my dear friend, Mrs. Lemesurier, was murdered on Saturday night—not much more, I suppose, than half an hour after I had last seen her.

"I am sure you will understand why I can make no comment now on the dreadful facts, nor add to this any of those things which were in the letter which never got posted. You know my thought.

"Ever most truly yours,

"STEPHEN GAMBIER."

Feeling that she conferred a favour almost without parallel, the girl permitted Eugenia to read this letter.

Eugenia was less surprised by what she thought its commonplace tone, than by Clarissa's pride in it.

"The very nicest letter I ever had in my life," she had said, and Eugenia, having read, stared at her with eyes dangerously quizzical.

Clarissa's, fortunately, were bent once more on the paper Eugenia had returned to her.

"Well, in the matter of ardour ——" began the elder woman. But the younger interrupted.

"I like him best of all for this letter," she said. "He wouldn't neglect me, and yet knew how not to offend my taste by — by the ordinary things, while there is such a dreadful horror hanging over us all. You ought to see that, Eugenia."

"I do see it, dear," said Eugenia meekly; too wise to ask why Mrs. Lemesurier's death should be a family concern, if Clarissa's engagement were a mere makeshift. "I was only afraid you might find it disappointing, with so little — so little affection in it."

Then she saw Clarissa blush — actually blush.

"Oh, no!" said the girl, turning away from the dark eyes which distressed her. "This isn't the time for that."

She answered the letter very briefly:

"Please believe that you have my deepest sympathy. Do not trouble to write to me, unless you have both leisure and inclination. I liked your letter very much."

And after the formal signature, she added: "Please keep that other letter that you did not post."

This postscript shot a single thread of gold through the web of gloom, distrust and suspicion which filled for Stephen Gambier that first Thursday after the death of Miriam Lemesurier.

The mere necessity, in giving his evidence, of speaking at all in a public place of Miriam's affairs and of her friendship, was disgusting him.

Before his own turn came, he had to listen to many

others, notably old Hidges. To hear the bald statements as to her maiden name, her marriage, her divorce, the assumption of the name of Lemesurier and her changes of residence to avoid the persecutions of the man who had once been her husband, made poor Stephen utterly miserable in his impotence. If only the indecency of the thing might have been met by getting up and telling them what manner of woman this was they dared speak about in coarse voices in that filthy room! For those damned jurymen, the divorce was a fact, while the story she had told him of it, that day on the moor, would have been romantic hearsay. Like Clarissa, he began to wish for other ways of getting at truth. The coroner and his jury were engaged, no doubt, in finding the cause of death, and incidentally, perhaps, in affixing the guilt of murder. But all that morning, till the adjournment came rather sooner than he had expected, Stephen Gambier felt he was attending a conspiracy to blacken the fame of his friend.

At Les Nuages Clarissa secured the first taste of the English paper on the Friday morning. And from the skillfully abbreviated evidence in the Paris *Daily Mail*, she made herself a picture more vivid, perhaps, than accurate, of the Coroner's court, and the persons summoned before it. And her heart ached in the strongest sympathy she had yet felt with Stephen Gambier, when she read how he had been obliged to speak of intimate matters concerning a woman that had been his friend.

When the little family met at breakfast, Silas also had read the report, but Eugenia, hating newspapers, had waited to pick up the news from the mouths of the others.

When she opened the subject by asking him of the inquest,

"I don't think it is a thing we can talk about," said Silas, "— not before Clarissa."

"When Clarissa happens to be the person most interested? Why not?" asked his daughter. "I'm certainly going to talk a great deal about it to Eugenia, and we'd better have you to put us right where we don't understand.

I can see by your face, father dear, that you think there's something to be prim and secret about. I haven't discovered that part yet, but ——"

"Of course you wouldn't understand," he interrupted.

"That's why I'm going to tell Eugenia all about it now, and you'll tell me where I go wrong, and what it is I've missed out. It's no good trying to stop me, dear, because I'm feeling it all very deeply. And you can't deny that it concerns me very much indeed, because it concerns Mr. Gambier."

"I'm afraid that is only too true," admitted her father.

Clarissa did not miss the form of his remark; but she refrained from comment at the moment, proceeding instead to a résumé of the first day's inquest.

"First, there was a servant-girl — Anne Scholes. She told how she was the only servant in the house, because her mistress was going away the next day, and had dismissed all the others; how a gentleman had called about ten o'clock on the Saturday night, and her mistress had told her to go to bed; she did not catch the gentleman's name, but recognised Stephen as the person she meant. Then she told the court how she had found her mistress dead on the sofa, at a quarter to seven on the Sunday morning.

"Then there was the policeman that had been fetched off his beat by Anne Scholes, and the inspector the policeman had telephoned for. Then there was a Mr. Hodge — no, Hidges — who was Mrs. Lemesurier's lawyer, and spoke very nicely about her; he had to tell them that she had been a Miss Tancred, had married a Major Urquhart with whom she was so unhappy that she ran away from him, and that, after she was divorced from him, she had come into a lot of money; and that her late husband had bothered her so dreadfully to marry him again that she had been obliged to change her name and conceal from him where she lived.

"Next there was poor Mr. Gambier."

"Why 'poor'?" asked Silas.

Clarissa knew that her father was in ill-humour, and

began to see why. Therefore was she very gentle in her reproof.

"A tender-hearted and delicate-minded man like you, dear," she replied, "ought to know even better than I do why he is to be pitied."

"Go on," said Eugenia; she was interested, certainly, in the story, but even more in the teller.

"Poor Stephen," continued Clarissa, pointing the repetition of the epithet by varying the name, "told them that the dead lady was a friend of his; that on Saturday afternoon he had arrived in London from the Continent; that he found a letter from her asking him to call as soon as possible; that he reached her house that same night at ten o'clock; that he talked with her till twelve, and then went away. They asked him some questions, amongst others: what did he and Mrs. Lemesurier talk about? They had talked, said Stephen, about a chance meeting that he had had with a man that he afterwards guessed correctly to be that former husband of hers, and of how he was afraid that through some accidental words of — of his, the man had found out where the poor lady lived and what she called herself. And he had written her a letter to tell her this. And that was why she had written to ask him to come and see her directly he arrived in London, because she was going away early on the Sunday morning in her car, and not coming back to London for a long time. Then the Coroner asked him if there was anything else that they had talked about, and Stephen said yes — a private matter: she had wished, before she left town, to congratulate him on something very good that she had heard was going to happen to him."

Here Clarissa, more to Eugenia's than to her father's surprise, drew herself erect with an expression of face and carriage at once lofty and deprecating, and added:

"That must have meant me, don't you think, Eugenia?"

Eugenia nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

"Horrible!" exclaimed the girl, softly. "Father, what's a jury like?"

"Butcher, coal-merchant, stock-broker's clerk, fried-fish and toy-shop."

"Simply horrid!" repeated Clarissa: "having to talk about her and allude to me—to them! Well, then he told them that he had only feared annoyance for her from this dreadful Major Urquhart—not violence. And then he said that her last words almost to him that night were that she had a letter to write, and that he had since thought that she probably meant a letter to himself about something that she found it easier to write than to speak of."

"They let him go at last, and then there was a policeman who'd been in the street when Stephen went away. He'd stopped a stray taxi for him, and knew the time was the time Stephen had said. And this same policeman told them how he'd seen a light in the side downstairs window of the house, and also in the front, over the door, every time he'd passed on his beat, till just about five minutes past one on Sunday morning, and then, just as he was looking at the house, both those lights had gone out. Then they had two other policemen, one an Inspector Filson and another with a German name—something about stars—m-m——"

"Morgenstern," said Silas. "I know the man. We had him about the jewel case at the Stores. A detective. He's risen high since then."

"Well, these men told a lot about little tiny things they'd seen in the room where the body was found. It was, as the Coroner said, all guesswork. But they suggested that Mrs. Lemesurier *had* been writing a letter after she'd said good-bye to Stephen, and that somebody—it was in their heads, I think, that it might have been the old husband—that somebody had come in and that there'd been a quarrel about the letter and that the man had killed her, and perhaps taken the letter away."

"How did they make out that there was a letter?" asked Eugenia, losing sight in the drama itself even of Clarissa.

"Oh, it was like something in a magazine story—about a pen on the floor, and an ink-spot, and a penny stamp that

couldn't be accounted for. Anne Scholes was recalled, and showed that there had been seven stamps, and only six could be found. Oh, yes, and the two doctors, who said how the murder had been done. That was dreadful — holding the poor woman hard with one hand, and pushing her beautiful chin back with the other till her neck was broken. And then they adjourned the inquest."

"Why did they adjourn it?" asked Eugenia.

"Because of some inquiries that were being made — which the Coroner said it was inadvisable to specify."

"I didn't notice the date he fixed," said Silas, "for resuming the inquiry."

"He said he thought till Monday would be long enough. They could perhaps hear some more evidence then, he said, if not all of it."

Eugenia, afraid of regarding both her dear people at once, busied herself with her neglected food, while Silas filled, emptied and filled his glass again. Clarissa, pleased with her exposition, looked first at her father and then at his wife. Then she ate a little herself. When the silence had stretched to her limit,

"Well, dad," she asked, "do you think I understand?"

Silas sipped at his second glass as if he did not like the wine. He wished to be just. He wished, above all, to play the father beyond criticism. He believed in "the young person." But he began to perceive that she was dead. Yet, if any man should dare to hint that his twenty-three-year-old daughter was less virginal than her mother or her grandmother in her state, he would have used any means within reach to make that man sorry he had been born.

Should he say the thought in his mind, or should he wait upon circumstance?

He had been in his boyhood and early manhood of that extreme and sentimental chastity which was enjoined and wisely encouraged by a phase of opinion which may, for want of an historic *locution*, be called Victorian Chivalry. To those who have not detected the good and evil of this

attitude, it is hardly worth while to mention the poets, painters and novelists who contributed, among the more spiritually inclined of the English middle class, to offer an ideal, somewhat anæmic, of woman so superior on the spiritual side to man as to afflict the full-blooded male with an admiring avoidance. Silas Beltervane remembered an uncle. The uncle had once said to the sisterless boy: "Do what you may, Silas, my lad — and I am sure you will do your best — do what you may, you'll never be so pure, so *good* in the sense that your Maker sees and understands goodness, as your aunts, your cousins and your mother are. Why, women suffer, endure and dare all things for man!" There was much more of it — Mariolatry gone mad — released from the decent restraints imposed by a priesthood potentially virile.

Since his boyhood, the woman that was a slope-shouldered and undersized figure in bas-relief, set up for a somewhat insensate adoration, had waned. Silas' estimate of sex had grown juster with the years. His great shops, his natural distaste for the feminist movement as one of the results of his old inculcated opinion, his experience in politics, sufficiently varied, had left him with a general estimate of the two halves of humanity more consonant with sound philosophy and traditional religion. But in his own family, the more, perhaps, because he had only one child, there was a residuum of this bias towards an emasculate chivalry. Hardly would he have dared put it into words; yet there was in his mind a feeling which might have made him prefer, in mating his daughter, a virgin fool to a hero that had learned the sweetness of all women through the bitterness of some.

The type of Silas Beltervane is more common than interesting; it is healthy in a minority, as keeping a balance; and it is touched upon here, because Silas Beltervane had the great but disturbing fortune to beget Clarissa.

He adored Clarissa, but she disturbed him, making him, or trying to make him, live a life which consisted in perpetual modification of his theories.

"Do you think I understand?" she was asking.

Silas thought it probable that she understood to the full as much as he of a matter very painfully confused. But he was bred in a shyness which made it "good form" to suppose a woman ignorant especially of those matters which concern her most. He also in this case hoped that his daughter, for her own sake, had missed the significance of the first day's inquest.

"An excellent précis, my dear," he said.

"With something left out?" asked Clarissa.

"Yes," replied Silas. Being honest, he foresaw that he must say it some day, and so said it now.

"What?" asked his daughter.

"The character of the woman," he answered. He was almost a pioneer of the school which had nearly succeeded in specialising the word *morals*. He had begun even to extend the narrowing process to that more elusive word *character*. And his daughter was as well aware of his mental process as accustomed to his vocabulary. She was used to accepting both these words in their limitation to a single negative virtue.

"The lawyer-man — Mr. Hidges — he spoke of her as if he respected as well as admired her," she said. "Mr. Gambier told me she had been the best friend he ever had — or something like that. It seems she ran away from a rather dreadful husband. Considering what he's like, she might have done that without being wicked in the particular way you are screwing up your face about, father."

"Then," said Silas, "this Major Urquhart would not have been able to get his divorce."

"Well, even then," said Clarissa, "what does it matter? The poor thing is dead."

"But not her character. You will see, my child, how such a reputation must live after a woman in the lives and characters of her friends."

Silas was feeling virtuous, and showed it, while his daughter was saved from showing her disgust by the sudden desire which seized her to laugh at his pomposity.

"I believe you are right, father dear," she said. "It is not a proper subject for you to talk about. For it nearly made you say a thing which would have hurt me very much — perhaps might have made me angry. And I should hate feeling angry with you."

Silas took the snub patiently; but, when the meal was over, he went away by himself, full of a vague misgiving.

CHAPTER XX

SILAS MAKES TROUBLE

THE next day — Saturday, that is, 29th October — Clarissa walked into Mentone and back again before breakfast. She sat down to table in her hat.

Eugenia saw her husband's lips shaping to a question — and saw him, in his softly huffy way, abandon inquiry. Being, in these latter days, of no little wisdom, she asked his question herself.

"Where have you been, Clarissa?" she said.

"I walked to Mentone and back. And I'm frightfully hungry," answered the girl. "I sent a telegram to Mr. Gambier."

Silas looked up at her, but did not speak.

"If it weren't about a matter I promised not to mention to anyone," continued Clarissa, "I'd tell you all about it, father."

Thus, when Stephen's answering telegram was delivered to her, neither Eugenia nor Silas made any comment.

When she had read it, the girl looked first at one and then at the other. Eugenia saw the colour rise slowly to her face, and the slow tears filling her eyes.

"You are thinking unkind things of me, father," she said. "And it hurts me. I don't want to hide anything from you. This time I can't help it. But if you begin thinking unkind things of Mr. Gambier, you'll drive me to hiding everything."

Very gently she rose from her seat and went into the house.

She had telegraphed to Stephen:

"V. U. is here. Can I do anything? CLARISSA."

And Stephen had answered :

"The man is being attended to. Many thanks."

Eugenia, left alone with her husband, said to him :

"Silas, you've hurt the child."

"Poor Clarissa!" said Silas mournfully. "It isn't I, Eugenia."

"What d'you mean?" asked his wife.

"I mean it's this disgusting inquest — this man, if you force me to be explicit —"

"My dear," she interrupted, "I don't force you to be anything. But I see no objection to speaking plainly."

"Well, then, it's this Gambier that's going to hurt her."

"How? By being in trouble, poor man?"

"It's a wonderful thing, how you women will pity a rake, when his sins begin to find him out."

"Sins?" cried Eugenia. "What's the poor fellow done?"

"I can understand that Clarissa is missing the true bearing of it all," he retorted. "I don't know that I'm sorry it should have escaped you too, Eugenia. But it's as clear to me as — as the beauty of your eyes, little woman," he said tenderly, "that this woman that called herself Lemesurier was Gambier's mistress."

"Oh, Silas!" cried his wife. "That's a thing that's been said about people as often when it wasn't true as it has been unsuspected when it was. You're basing your certainty, I suppose, on his going to see her at ten o'clock and not coming away till twelve — while to a woman it's just as plain as the nose on your face that, as she was going away, and as she was an old friend, and as she had heard from him or someone else that he was going to marry Clarissa, she wanted to hear all about it, and congratulate him before she went. No woman can hear of a marriage without wanting to talk about it to somebody — to one of the people who are going to do it, for choice. Men won't understand that a woman's married again every time she hears

of a wedding. *You* never could see, for instance, why the only thing I ever read in a newspaper is the great weddings — royalties and dukes and millionaires. I believe, with me, it would be just the same if it were costers and their donahs — only they don't give them the space and the type. I'm always imagining I'm the bride and going to be as happy as you've made me."

"Little Mormon!" said her husband; and then, wondering whether his exclamation were altogether in good taste, and knowing it illogical, he grew once more portentously solemn. "All the same, I'm afraid that hardly covers it. She is of proved bad character; he admits knowing her for many years; she was, they say, of considerable beauty; when they met in the station at Roque Brune, Gambier, on Clarissa's own showing, knew better than to introduce the woman to a lady. If you ask me what probably happened on that Saturday night a week ago, I should guess that she most likely quarrelled with him about his intention to marry, and that ——"

Though he stopped himself, it was not done in time; for Eugenia perceived clearly enough what he had been afraid or ashamed to say. Her first feeling was anger against him for such a thought of her friend and Clarissa's lover. But this was quickly drowned in a sickening sense of how close poor Gambier had come to a very dreadful and unjust suspicion.

"Didn't the driver of the taxi give evidence of when he set him down at the Temple?" she asked.

"Not yet," said Silas.

"Then he will. And anyhow," said Eugenia triumphantly, "the policeman knows when he drove away, and how long afterwards the lights were put out."

Silas did not speak.

"Are you going to suggest," she asked, "that he came all that way back again, and deliberately — oh, Silas, it's horrid of you!"

Silas felt it was horrid.

"I'm suggesting nothing," he said weakly. "I merely

say that the man can't come out of it as he went in. For Clarissa's sake, I repeat, I am very much troubled."

"But at the Temple there'll be someone, surely, that can say when he went home, and whether he came out again or not. Silas," said Eugenia solemnly, "if you hadn't had some sort of prejudice against Mr. Gambier, you'd never have let such notions into your head."

"My dear child," replied Silas, reminding her by the judicial gravity in his bearing of the day when she had been for the first time summoned before him, so that in spite of what she considered his wrong-headedness, she yet in her heart treated him gently—"my dear child, I have no dislike of the man. But I have a deep—an ineradicable prejudice against handing over my daughter to a man of loose morals. And I shall be very much surprised if Stephen Gambier comes out of this affair undamaged on that side of his reputation which, from my point of view—for I have to consider him as Clarissa's possible husband—which, from my point of view is the most important."

"Then I am sure you are making a very great mistake," said his wife.

"If so," he answered, "no one will be better pleased than I."

Since their *rapprochement* which he attributed to the new conviction of his love which had come to her through the knowledge that he had been on the point of committing on her account what the French call *un crime passionnel*, Silas had perceived an increasing tendency in his wife to hold opinions of her own. By her face, he knew she was going to express some now.

"Silas, dear," she said, "I admire you for almost everything you are: for your courage; for your kindness and unselfishness; for your justice—when you are just, and that's nearly always; for your devotion to me, which is the greatest thing, because it's the hardest to understand; and for the simplicity and faithfulness of your ideas about

women, which are, I do believe, the only really good ones for a man to have. But I do think your very niceness makes you sometimes, through lack of proportion, unwise and unjust about other men. When you are talking about that one thing, you seem to forget all the other things — things quite as necessary to goodness. Perhaps it's a kind of contrariness that makes me want to scream out that of all the good things you are and all the virtues you have, it isn't that last one that — that — oh, I can't say properly what I mean! But look here: if that darling Clarissa *had* to marry a man that was a coward, *or* a man that was tricky in business, or a man that was sometimes cruel, or a man that was — well, very different from you in regard to women — each of the four, I mean, with his single fault, which would you choose for her?"

"Are you asking conundrums, my dear?" said Silas. "That's a difficult one."

"There you are: it's not difficult. If you followed your good, healthy feelings, you'd throw out the first three. But if you decided in the way you sometimes talk, you'd begin by throwing out number four."

Silas persisted in ignoring her problem.

"I'm not theorising, my child," he said. "I'm just wondering whether it wouldn't be possible to make Clarissa see that she ought, unless things take very soon a different aspect, to give this Mr. Gambier his *congé* as gently and courteously as she can."

For almost half a minute Eugenia was silent. Then,

"I don't pretend to understand the dear thing altogether," she said. "Clarissa is much bigger than I am. But I do know the sort of way things work in her. The worse it looks for him — the more disagreeable and uncomfortable it gets for him, I mean, the more she will stick to him. I've never been able," she went on, greatly daring, "to tell quite how far she was in love with him at first. But I'm simply, absolutely certain that she entirely trusts him and his word. I think he deserves that. But whether she

loved him or not, and even if she wanted to be out of it, she'd never say so while a single human being had a word to say against his record."

That he and Eugenia could now differ without acrimony or even discomfort was a great satisfaction to Silas. He was not of a mind sufficiently analytical to have perceived that acrimony in the past had always been, if not expressed by him, yet of his making; he only knew that since he had understood Eugenia better, no bitterness ever seemed to come of their differing.

"But, my dear," he said, "surely it's my duty to make her see what sort of — of libertine she's running the risk of being united to."

"First, you haven't an ounce of proof," retorted his wife. "Second, if you had a ton, she's in no mood to believe a word of it. She was a little bit engaged to the man before any trouble came. Now, she'll feel he belongs to her more and more, the worse the trouble grows. That's us — or, at least, it's Clarissa," said Eugenia Beltervane.

He knew it was true; he did not think it ought to be true; but the reflection that the whole scheme of things was wrong did nothing to furnish Silas Beltervane with the courage to open an attack upon his daughter's advocacy of an undesirable lover.

So he let things, for the moment, take their course. Their course, so far as *Les Nuages* was concerned, seemed to be merely Clarissa's. When first he met her, after she had left them with that gentle loftiness and the tears brimming her eyes, he was glad to be greeted with a smile. When, instead of ignoring their difference, she said sweetly: "I'm sorry I got hurt, and — well, nearly cried, just because we didn't agree, dear," he admired her courage and wished it his.

But when she added, with a magnificent tolerance: "I've been very much distressed, you know, by all this wretched business of poor Mrs. Lemesurier's death. Of course I can see how you are afraid it may involve me in unpleasantness, and even how you might fancy in some vague kind

of way that it won't do Mr. Gambier any good. But if you knew and understood him as I do, dear, that'd only make you keener in our interest."

"What is your interest?" he asked.

"The discovery and the punishment of the person who killed Stephen's friend, of course," replied Clarissa.

"Well, my child," he said, trying to speak openly and kindly, "of course I hope it'll come all right. But I'm dissatisfied with Gambier, and I hate your being mixed up in it. The whole thing's disagreeable to me. I wish we'd never met him."

"We owe him too much to talk like that," said Clarissa softly.

"Owe him? Owe him what?" asked Silas, ill-humour clouding his memory.

"I owe Eugenia to him," replied his daughter. And Silas went away ashamed.

Clarissa found it long waiting until the Tuesday for news of the resumed inquest.

Until the Monday night she heard nothing bearing on the case — except some vague words from Alexandre, the second gardener, of how the wife of his friend Giovanelli had been questioned by the gendarmes and an *agent de police* in plain clothes; and of how a young man from Mentone also had visited Benedetta at her house. He was, thought Alexandre, from the British Consulate — certainly not of the police. But Benedetta, said Alexandre, would tell nothing, not even to her husband, of what these people had asked or been told.

Having no reason to doubt that Benedetta had given them the same information as to herself, Clarissa found her waiting lightened of anxiety.

CHAPTER XXI

THE RATIFICATION

ON Monday, 31st October, the day of the resumed inquest, Clarissa found means to occupy the surface of her mind. But mixed with everything she did, behind all she saw, beneath every page she read there was with her all the time the idea of Stephen Gambier in trouble.

Every memory of him was of a man who got other people out of trouble. Eugenia's life and beauty, her father's happiness, Clarissa's discomfort, even down to her supposed inability to write a formal letter breaking their bogus engagement—all these were things he had saved or smoothed over; and in each case the help had been given as the simple due of a common humanity, without prejudice of love or obligation. For it was at the end of things, so far as their contact had lasted, that he had offered her love, admitting, or almost admitting, that the love had arisen as an accident, or by-product, out of his kindly deed. That such a man should now be compelled to speak publicly of things which might well have a very private significance for him seemed an intolerable outrage. Whatever Stephen was or was not, she told herself, he was of the most perfect discretion and loyalty. And she remembered how superbly he had snubbed her, the night before her father came home. It could still burn a little, that lesson he had given her—though now, somehow, there was sweetness also in the sting of it.

Before she had been able to say even to herself that she loved the man, there had come a trouble upon him that seemed to combine the qualities of a blow at the heart and a slap in the face; and Silas, with his ominous attitude of suspicion, had somehow suggested to her that worse

might yet be coming for him; so that, before the question of love or no love had fairly come up for settlement, she had found herself in the field as his champion against all comers.

As she dressed for dinner on that Monday night, she thought at last definitely of her position. She was at her glass while she turned the matter over and over in her mind, attempting to apply some test from book or hearsay to her own case. Noticing at last how particular was the nicety with which she was pursuing her adornment, she suddenly laughed — to the surprise of her maid, who had never before seen her mistress thus seized by the humour of her own thoughts.

She was saying to herself: "After all, if you don't know you are not, you probably are."

As they sat down to table,

"You look even extra lovely to-night, Clarissa," said her stepmother. And the girl smiled back at her with frank pleasure in the praise.

They were half through dinner when a telegram was brought to her. It was from Stephen.

"Copy draft letter and dispatch before reading newspapers."

Silas and Eugenia saw her go white and then red; Silas felt merely resentment of the secrecy which he did not dare assail; but his wife saw on the girl's face, as its flush died away, an expression of self-knowledge and resolution which mean that a woman had found herself.

Clarissa laid the telegram beside her plate, and went on serenely eating her dinner.

She would not, when they were alone together, tell even Eugenia what was in it, lest she should burden her with a knowledge her father must not share.

Because she was now sure not only of her intention, but positively also of her inclination, she slept early and well. But she had little doubt that something evil had happened

at the inquest, and that Stephen had read her character so well as to offer her the opportunity of claiming her liberty before this bad thing had come to her knowledge. "He doesn't want them to be able to say I threw him over on account of anything but the one thing—that I don't love him. And I shouldn't wonder," she thought, "if the dear man is afraid I might keep him just from a kind of sporting decency, when I'd have broken it off readily enough if everything had gone smoothly."

This, she thought, was surely a man to be loved.

Next morning she was out of doors and at the garage before nine o'clock.

"Stokes," she said, "please run me down to Mentone as quickly as you can. It's awfully important."

Stokes had an idea that "this inquest in town" was going to bring trouble into the household. He had some knowledge of his master's character, and had already given Silas' valet his opinions on the case. "If it wasn't for that taxi-driver and that cop," he had said, "those devils of police'd be making a very pretty case against Gambier. Question of motive? Yes. Well, him just engaged to Miss Beltervane, her making a row about their lurid past—a row—a scuffle, and he accidentally slips into his third speed, and—there you are. Of course any man of sense'd *know* Gambier didn't do anything of the kind—if he knew Gambier. But the police——!"

Stokes didn't love the police, but in his way he loved his young mistress, and respected the man who had caught Eugenia when she leapt from his car. He considered it one of the best bits of fielding he'd ever seen, and often said so.

"I've orders to be ready for Mr. Beltervane with his car at ten o'clock, Miss Beltervane," he said.

"All right," she answered. "Take me down, and start straight back. I can get something to bring me out. I may want to stay some time, anyhow."

It was five-and-twenty minutes past nine when Stokes *dropped* her at the post office.

She sent her telegram:

"Have not read papers. When I write, letter will be my own. CLARISSA."

Leaving the post office, she drove to the Hôtel des Ambassadeurs, where she was known, ordered coffee in a private room, and told the waiter to bring her all the morning papers. A little she found in the local journals, a little in Galignani, but much in the Paris *Daily Mail*.

An official from Scotland Yard had given evidence of the receipt from the French police authorities of information that Major Urquhart had been living continuously for the last year at least at his house in the hills above Roque Brune, near Mentone. Major Urquhart had told the *agent* sent to interview him that he never read the newspapers, but had received a letter from Messrs. Hidges & Handling, informing him of the death in London of the lady who had once been his wife. Major Urquhart's single servant, interviewed separately at her own house, had been prepared to swear that Major Urquhart had not spent a single night away from home since the first week of October.

Mr. Hidges, recalled, had given evidence of writing a week ago to Major Urquhart suggesting that Major Urquhart might wish to attend the inquest, and of informing him when and where the Coroner would sit; and of receiving in reply Major Urquhart's positive refusal to attend.

Hereupon the Coroner had remarked that he did not see how Major Urquhart's coming could have helped the jury.

John Adrian, the driver of a taxi-cab, had given evidence that he had taken up, at the gate of the house in Campden Hill called Hillside, at about three minutes past midnight on the morning of Sunday, 23rd October, a gentleman whom he identified with Mr. Stephen Gambier, then in court. He had driven Mr. Gambier to the gate at the end of Inner Temple Lane.

It was here that the Coroner had asked what Clarissa thought a very curious question: *had John Adrian seen Mr. Gambier pass through the gate?*

"No," John Adrian had answered. "It was late, and I wasn't curious."

"But if you turned round to go west again, after Mr. Gambier had paid you," said the Coroner, "you might have noticed whether the gate had been opened for him."

It appeared, however, that he had not turned his car. His garage being in Bloomsbury, he had just run on and turned up Chancery Lane, never even looking about him for another fare, but only too glad, after a hard day, to get home to bed.

Asked if he had seen any other taxi or horse-cabs in Fleet Street, John Adrian remembered one car coming westward — empty, he thought; remembered it because, though the street was pretty well deserted, he had cleared the other vehicle by only a few inches as he crossed from his off-side to the near. Whether this had been a licensed cab or a private car, he could not be certain.

Then the Coroner wanted a precise statement of the time when Mr. Gambier was set down.

"Near as possible to twenty past twelve," said John Adrian.

The Coroner opined that it was five miles from Hillside to Inner Temple Lane.

"A bit over, I think," replied the driver.

"Allowing for the bit over," said the Coroner, "that makes your average speed for the run about eighteen miles an hour."

John Adrian thought that was about it. "The streets being fairly empty," he added, "I'd have done a bit more, if it hadn't been a bad, greasy night."

Then one Peter Stenhouse was called. He had been on duty as porter at the gate of Inner Temple Lane on the night of 22nd-23rd October. He had admitted Mr. Gambier shortly after midnight; would swear that he had let no one out nor in later. But, pressed to declare that it was earlier than twelve-forty-five, he said he was sure it was — believed it was — but in the end would not swear. This method of questioning was extended; he was asked

to swear that he opened the gate for Mr. Gambier before one o'clock, and could not; before half-past one, with the same result; but did at last give his oath that it was before two o'clock, because he had waked from a snooze in his big chair, and, having mended his fire, had looked at the clock. The hands then stood at five minutes to two — and, judging by his feeling, he'd been asleep the best part of two hours.

"I suppose," said the Coroner, "that you had been asleep, or half asleep before — when Mr. Gambier rang the bell, I mean."

Peter Stenhouse admitted that he had been asleep.

"It comes to this, then," remarked the Coroner, "that we know it couldn't have been before twenty-past twelve; and we know, as far as the porter is concerned, that it couldn't have been later than five minutes to two. And that is all we do know."

Mr. Stephen Gambier, recalled, swore, in answer to a question, that he had entered the Temple by the gate in question, about, and certainly not later than, five-and-twenty minutes past midnight — adding that he had not gone beyond the Temple precincts again until four o'clock on the Sunday afternoon.

Somewhat vaguely — for she had not yet been able to divine the suspicion which had suggested the Coroner's questions — vaguely Clarissa felt all this to be disagreeable and disturbing enough; but worse was to come.

The next witness was the chief clerk of a firm of solicitors styled Jerome & Pettifer. He gave evidence that the late Mrs. Lemesurier, who had never, except in this instance, been a client of the firm he represented, had called upon the senior partner on 13th August last, and given full instructions for the drafting of a will. She had returned the next day, when the witness had read over the draft to her and received her instructions for a slight alteration; and that three days later he had himself, acting on instructions from Mr. Jerome, called upon Mrs. Lemesurier at Hillside, Campden Hill, with the engrossed document, and

had been present as witness to her signature of the same.

Further questioned, this witness said the dispositions of the will were as follows: To Mr. Herman Hidges, her usual legal adviser, and to Mr. Cyrus Jerome, of Jerome & Pettifer, there were, as joint executors, legacies of two thousand pounds apiece. The estate was worth some one hundred and thirty-five thousand pounds. The residuary legatee was Mr. Stephen Gambier, of the Inner Temple. Letters of administration had been applied for. In compliance with his instructions, the witness had a copy of the will in court, which he handed to the Coroner.

A little later, Stephen Gambier was again recalled.

Being asked whether he had been aware that Mrs. Lemesurier intended making him her heir, he replied that he had not known; that she had done so he had heard this morning for the first time, from Mr. Hidges.

The Coroner's summing up, which seemed to consist in an unnecessary lecture to the jury on the difference between evidence that a man could have done a thing and evidence that he did do that thing, Clarissa skipped lightly over, to read the verdict of "Murder by a person or persons unknown."

This, had she known it could be reached at the second sitting, she would have looked for first of all. But, fearing nothing worse than discomfort and annoyance for Stephen, she had been less concerned in the finding of the jury than in the nature and tendency of the evidence.

These had been becoming clearer as she read, and now, in spite of that "person unknown," she felt that a large part of the gross public of England at least was curiously and heartlessly debating whether or not Stephen Gambier had, for lust of money, combined with other reasons of the most detestable kind, committed this murder.

She deliberately finished her lukewarm coffee, folded *The Daily Mail* into a small, thick wad which she jammed into her hand-bag, ordered a carriage and was driven back to

the post office. There she wrote out, in a bold hand, a second telegram:

“Provisional agreement of 19th October ratified. Papers read. I send my love. CLARISSA.”

As she got into her hired carriage to be driven home, her cheeks felt very hot. But, because of what she had done, she felt a glow of the happiness which comes from courage. The other happiness, about which she knew so little, must wait.

She would know more when she saw him, anyhow.

CHAPTER XXII

CLARISSA AT WORK

ON the way home, Clarissa's hired carriage had to draw aside into one of the bays hollowed for that purpose in the cliff, to make way for her father's big touring-car, coming down the hill.

Silas sat in it, dressed, she thought, for a journey. He waved his hand to his daughter as he slid by, but neither spoke nor smiled.

She found Eugenia by the fountain in the orange grove, with the face of one that has been weeping. *The Daily Mail* lay beside her: she had actually, it appeared, been reading a newspaper.

Clarissa sat down and put an arm round her waist.

"I'm not crying," she said with pride.

"I can't help it," said Eugenia. "Nor could you, if you really cared."

Then Clarissa, unlike the Clarissa of the past three years, dropped her face on Eugenia's bosom, hugging her close with arms that shook now and again while they squeezed.

"I can't cry — not yet," she said, "because I've just found out how much I do care."

"Then tell him, child — now's the time to tell him, Clarissa."

"He is told," said the girl. "In fact — well, I sent him a telegram." Then she laughed softly. "It's rather queer," she went on, "but it seems as if it was sending the telegram that has made me understand what a lot I do care, instead of the other way round, which of course it ought to have been."

"You baby child!" cried Eugenia. "Why, you've been in love with him ever since — ever since —"

Because she did not seem able to fix a date,

"Since when?" asked Clarissa. "D'you mean since he went away?"

"I've seen it coming — growing bigger and bigger — oh, long before that," replied Eugenia.

"I don't think I noticed anything," said Clarissa, "till he went away. It seemed — you'll excuse me, dear — but it seemed as if everything got dull and worrying then."

There was a little silence while Eugenia patted her shoulder.

"So then I began to wonder," said Clarissa at last.

Eugenia, still softly patting, did not speak.

"You don't mind, do you?" asked Clarissa.

"My dear," replied the elder woman, in a tone unusually solemn, "that was all silliness. But I am awfully fond of him and I think anybody'd say I jolly well ought to be. I can't say now that I'm altogether sorry I made such a fool of myself; because, if I hadn't, there'd be a thing or two about your father I should never have found out. And if it hadn't been for the way you two kind people covered up my silliness, I don't believe that you, dear, would ever have found out anything about Stephen. I'm perfectly happy, Clarissa, and your father's an angel to me."

She paused a moment, looking thoughtfully at the girl. Then,

"All the same, you know," she added, "he's being very naughty about this thing in town."

Clarissa nodded. "Yes," she said. "It's almost as if he had begun with a prejudice against Stephen, and expected — almost wished to believe anything to his discredit. I can't understand. Because, you see, he has no idea that I — that we weren't — weren't in earnest at first."

"It's the woman — the poor dead woman, I think," said Eugenia. "He got it into his head at the very first that she was what he calls 'not respectable.' Everything as it comes out seems to corroborate the notion. From her be-

ing divorced he rushes to the conclusion, I suppose, that she couldn't know any man without knowing him too intimately. Talk about women's logic!"

Clarissa looked at her curiously.

"Doesn't it make you rather angry?" she asked.

"Nowadays, dear," replied Eugenia, "I somehow can't be angry with him. And you need not either. It's all an exaggeration of the notion he has always held that his women-folk are too good for contact with the common facts and ordinary conduct of life. I suppose he could, in the usual way, have let you marry Stephen Gambier, without prying more than was seemly into his private affairs. But Stephen's friendship with this Mrs. Lemesurier he judges as he feels sure the world will judge it, and that makes him furious that your name should even be associated with Stephen's."

Clarissa laughed — softly and a little doubtfully.

"He'd be fierouser, then," she said, "if he knew about my telegrams." And she told Eugenia of Stephen's one message and her two. "Of course," she said in conclusion, "you're never to tell him anything I tell you about me and Stephen, until I give you leave."

Eugenia promised.

"Where was he going just now in the big car?" asked Clarissa. "He raised his cap to me, but he never smiled."

"He heard this morning that the Cuypers and their yacht never went to any of the places they talked about. They've been loafing about Corsica for nearly a fortnight, and now they're back at Toulon. He's gone there, he says, to shut the woman's mouth."

"About what?"

"Your engagement, dear."

Clarissa laughed once more.

"I don't believe he'll be in time. Poor, darling old dad! he's got nobody but himself to thank for that. But if he begins telling people I'm not engaged," she went on, "I'll write to every blessed friend I have in the world and tell them I am. If that's not enough, I will have

'A Marriage has been Arranged' in every decent newspaper in London. What did he say about this?" she asked, touching *The Daily Mail*.

"That he'd better get to town quick, if he wanted to speak to Stephen Gambier before they had him shut up."

"But — but that sounds so — flippant — so cruel! Does he want them to be so absurd as to accuse him of killing her, just because he thinks he'd — he'd loved her?" asked Clarissa, aghast.

"You see, dear," replied Eugenia, very gently, "it's the money — that will. I really almost wish your father would go to London, so that you and he wouldn't meet again till it's all over."

"Do you mean to tell me," asked Clarissa, "that he actually pretends to believe that Mrs. Lemesurier was — was Stephen's lover; that he used his influence to get her to make a will in his favour; and that then, having met me, he — he made away with her, in order to — to —"

She could not finish.

"He doesn't say it is so. At present he's precise about that. But he says that's the way the evidence points, and that the Treasury is bound, on the evidence before the Coroner, to prosecute. There was one thing —"

But here Eugenia flinched.

"It doesn't matter — that part," she said, checking herself too late.

"I'd better know it all, now you've begun. Tell me, Eugenia dear," said the girl, with a note of coaxing in her voice which sounded almost unpleasing, coming from lips so white and strained; "tell me everything, and I will tell you something nobody knows but me."

"He said that they'd only to find the cabman who drove him back to the house — her house, you know — to — to have a complete case against him."

"Assuming at once, of course," said Clarissa bitterly, "that such a cabman exists! Anything else?"

"D'you remember that the cabman — the taxi-cab driver called Adrian, I mean — gave evidence that he'd seen a

motor-car coming past the gate of the Temple just as he left it, and when Stephen, though Adrian couldn't see him, must, or at least might have been still standing there on the pavement?"

"I remember," said Clarissa.

"Silas says that if that was a private car going home empty, and if he had managed to stop it and bribe the man to take him out to Campden Hill, or say to the bottom of Hornton Street, we certainly never should hear of it. The man isn't likely to give himself away by volunteering evidence. And then—well, your father thinks the most damning thing of all is that the will was drawn, not by her regular man of business, but by a firm she'd never employed before."

"That looks to me as if Mrs. Lemesurier had merely wished to keep Mr. Hidges from knowing what she meant to do—perhaps only to avoid advice she wouldn't anyhow take. Or, very likely," said Clarissa, "she knew that Hidges knew Stephen, and, being only a woman, was afraid Hidges might let it out. For I'm quite certain if she knew Stephen at all, she'd know he wouldn't like it—I mean, if—if——"

"Yes, of course. But the way you guess depends, doesn't it, dear, altogether upon what you know, or think you know of the people you're guessing about. When a woman you don't know is murdered, and a man you do know is suspected of doing it, and he the man that's had your perfectly adorable daughter promised to him—well, then the woman that's dead isn't a person that'd think this doubtful son-in-law an unselfish saint, careless of gold. She'd be more likely to try and keep his—his friendship by letting him know she meant him to have her money some day, if she just happened to die first. To Silas she's not a woman, you see, only a bundle of theories to account for a lot of uncomfortable facts."

"Yes, I see," said Clarissa. "You do understand him! Somehow, Eugenia," said her stepdaughter, "I'm always finding out new things that I like about you."

"I think, you know," said Eugenia, simple as a child,

"that I'm rather nicer than I used to be, and a good deal cleverer — where it has anything to do with your father. So you won't be hard on him, will you? Because, when he's been wrong, he's a perfect darling about saying so, and he *is* wrong this time — so there!"

"I won't be horrid. And I won't let him make me horrid. I know what I know. I don't really know Stephen, I admit. I mean I don't know nearly all the good things he is. But you can't be engaged — even if the engagement is only a sham — you can't be engaged to him for a fortnight without knowing all the bad things that he isn't — now can you? Besides, I saw Mrs. Lemesurier. Father never did see her, so of course he's unjust."

"I never saw her either," began Eugenia. But the girl cut her short.

"But you know and understand Stephen," she retorted. "The more father's right about his loving her, the more that counts."

Eugenia watched her, wondering when she would know jealousy. Clarissa, however, was absorbed in a scheme she was shaping.

"But you shall see her," she said.

"What d'you mean?" asked Eugenia, staring. "The woman's dead."

"After lunch," said Clarissa, "come for a walk with me, and I'll take you to see a wonderful picture."

"Of Mrs. Lemesurier?"

"By Sergentson," said Clarissa.

"I hate walking. How far is it?" asked Eugenia plaintively.

"You'd better have your silly old mule out. We won't take a man. I'll be donkey-boy — you dear old lazy-bones."

Eugenia was comforted, because she need not walk, interested because Clarissa had suddenly become almost gay. She knew the girl well enough to be sure that this lightening of spirit sprang from some scheme of action.

So she ate her breakfast in a mood of healthy good-humour. Clarissa also ate well and talked cheerfully.

When they had finished,

"What is it you are going to do with me?" asked Eugenia.

"You're going to put on a decent walking skirt, and be ready at three o'clock to climb into that gaudy pack-saddle on your silly old white mule. Then the mule and I," said Clarissa, "are going to take a walk, and you're going to make a call with me on a friend of mine. I'll tell you all about him as we go."

By a route longer but easier for the mule than the straighter, scrambling course she had taken twice alone and once with Stephen, Clarissa piloted the white mule and his burden to the foot of the narrow path which runs up from the Roman Road to the cottage of Major Evans. On the way she spoke of the man merely as she had known him under that name; telling how she and Stephen had taken shelter from the rain in the man's house.

"But of course," said Eugenia, "the man is the Vincent Urquhart mentioned in the papers this morning—the husband of the woman that was killed."

"What makes you so sure of that?" asked Clarissa.

"There's no other retired Army man that I know of, living in the hills above Roque Brune," replied Eugenia. "It's my belief that he's the man who——"

"Hush!" said Clarissa, "we're going to call on him now."

She was leading the mule up the narrow path.

"They've got evidence," she went on in a low voice, as if she feared being overheard, "that he hasn't been away from here. We'll talk about that after you've seen him—and something else."

"But—but I'm—I'm afraid, Clarissa."

"It's for Stephen. You're just going with me to make a call and thank him for giving me shelter that afternoon a fortnight ago."

From the Strada Romana to the Urquhart cottage the distance is not more than half a mile. But for one bend in the little rising valley, they might have seen the small,

squat house from the place where the path left the old paved road. The track is indeed two straight lines whose angle skirts the base of a jutting shoulder of rock.

Before they passed this bend, Clarissa stopped the mule, and keeping close to the rock, crept forward until she came in sight of her destination.

Her caution was rewarded; for there, not four hundred yards away, was the man she sought, coming from his house. He crossed his little plot of ground into the path, and turning his back on the visitors he could not see, went off with his long, limping stride up the hill. Clarissa watched him taking the way that she and Stephen had taken the day of the storm. When the tall figure at last disappeared over the ridge, after standing out clear for a moment against the sky, she went back to Eugenia.

"Come quickly," she said. "He's gone out."

She forced the white mule somehow into the amble which was its only gait beyond a walk, trotting herself alongside. At the wooden gate of the cottage she helped Eugenia from the saddle, fastened the mule's leading rein to a ring in the gate-post, and ran up the cobble-stoned path to the door. To her great satisfaction, this, though closed, was not locked; and she led Eugenia at once into the room where they had drunk Major Urquhart's horrible French tea.

The light was good. Clarissa drew back the curtain from Sergeantson's portrait of Mrs. Vincent Urquhart.

In the matter of painting and pictures Eugenia had both taste and knowledge; this picture stopped all her questions and expostulations. When she had gazed a while,

"That," said Clarissa, "is Mrs. Lemesurier. The man who has just gone out was once her husband. That's the woman my poor father talks of as if she were just a common bad woman. If — if he's right about them —"

"About whom?" asked Eugenia.

"Stephen and — and her," said the girl, nodding at the portrait. "If father's right," she repeated, flushing, "there's one thing I just simply can't understand."

Eugenia looked once more at the picture. Then Clarissa hid it with the curtain.

"Well?" asked the woman. "What is it you can't understand?"

"How he could ever look a second time at me," said the girl, and led the way out of the house.

They closed the door, and went back to the mule.

Eugenia laid a hand on its foolish saddle.

"Are you going home now?" she asked.

"I think we'd better make our call. I mean," answered Clarissa, "that we'll wait a few minutes and see whether he comes back. I'd rather he should find us here waiting for him, than catch sight of us before we get round the bend in the path. He's less likely to think we're doing what we are doing, if we go right up to him and say we've come to see him."

"What are we doing?"

"Spying on him," said Clarissa. "Oh!" she cried, with teeth and fingers clenched, "how I should like to help hang the man that could destroy all that beauty!"

"You little savage!" exclaimed Eugenia.

"And then," the girl continued, "if father can fancy Stephen could do it, there'll be hundreds of others to think it too. The only really satisfactory thing will be to prove that someone else did."

Eugenia had been gazing apprehensively up the path.

"He's coming," she said; and began to fumble at the reins and saddle. "Put me up, dear. I'm—oh, I'm afraid! Do let's get away."

"Nonsense! After waiting all this time for him!" Then, having bent sharpened eyes on the approaching figure, "What's he doing?" asked Clarissa. "He hasn't seen us yet."

"He's reading a letter," whispered Eugenia.

At this moment Vincent Urquhart raised his eyes from the paper in his hand. He had, perhaps, heard their voices. He quickened his pace, putting the paper into an envelope as he came down the hill towards them. Clarissa found his

bearing and appearance very like what they had been on the two previous occasions of their meeting. The little blue eyes regarded her as keenly, with the same needle-like spark in them; the walrus-tusk moustache fell over the corners of his mouth with the same melancholy droop. If difference there was, the red rims of the eyes were redder than before, and she felt an effort after better manners — an ill-fitting courtesy, wielded as some superannuated warrior might have brandished a rusty weapon in a feeble hand, against lusty young robbers.

The letter was stuffed into his pocket before Clarissa could see more of it than that the envelope was of a tint faintly violet, and oblong of shape.

Major Urquhart raised his cap. This he had done when she had met him before. But the old ungracious reluctance of salute had given place to a hurried nervousness, which smacked of the obsequious.

"How d'you do, Major Evans?" said Clarissa. "I've brought Mrs. Beltervane to see you. We wanted to thank you for harbouring me and our friend Mr. Gambier, during the storm about a fortnight ago. Mr. Gambier," she went on, watching him closely, "had to return to England some days ago — last Friday week I think it was. He wishes me to convey to you his thanks and kind regards. Eugenia, this is Major Evans, that I have told you about."

Eugenia bowed as graciously as she could. The man looked at her, and she felt, as she said afterwards, a creepy shudder all down her back. Once more the old tweed cap was lifted, this time with some, if not all of the old sullenness.

"I ought to tell you, perhaps," he said bluntly, "that my name isn't Evans, but Urquhart."

Clarissa laughed — quite her natural, silvery ripple.

"Oh, of course I knew that," she said. "And of course I gave you, Major Urquhart, the name you gave as yours. We went to your door," she continued, "but we couldn't make anyone hear. So we thought we'd wait a little, on the chance of your coming back."

In words and tones so brusque as to be almost surly, he invited the two women to come in and let him make tea for them.

Clarissa shook her head with a comical half-smile.

"You have experienced my tea already, I know, Miss Beltervane," said Urquhart. "I have got used to it, but I'm not surprised that you lack courage."

"Hay — French hay!" said Clarissa boldly. And Eugenia stared. Never had she known Clarissa so rude. "I always do pity lonely men so — and if they're fond of tea, and if they're English, and if they live on the Continent, it must be just awful. I'll tell you what we'll do, Major Urquhart. Anyhow, we couldn't stay now, not even to drink the best hay in France. You see, you've kept us a long time already, and I've got to get into Mentone and back before dinner. But we have some lovely tea — Darjeeling — and some extra-special China with a perfectly impossible name. Some day we'll load the mule with a packet of each, and come out here and make tea for you, Major Urquhart."

Eugenia, astonished, said never a word. Urquhart seemed to warm a little to the girl's chattering. As she said afterwards: "He didn't melt — never got really liquid — but just a little bit viscous, you know."

She made him lift Eugenia to the saddle, reminded him of the thunderstorm, told him with ambiguous confidence that she'd been thinking of her soul lately, and, finally, after they had started homeward, turned her head and asked him to promise they should see that splendid Sergeantson, when they had brought the tea and made it for him.

He stood at his little gate, staring after them till they were past the bend of the track.

Once out of his sight, Eugenia exploded in questions.

"Of course I mentioned the portrait," replied Clarissa. "Of course I told the rude truth about his beastly tea. Of course I said I knew his real name. Of course I talked quite out of character. He doesn't know what my character is. But he's not going to fancy now that I'm trying

to get him hanged, is he, dear? He'd expect a female spy to be much more civil and circumspect. Oh, I've done it all right. Only I meant to go on to Gorbio and see Benedetta Giovanelli, and I can't now."

"Why not?" asked Eugenia.

"Because I've got to go to Mentone. I may have Camille and the little car, mayn't I? And at dinner, dear, I'm going to tell you a lot of things — some that I said I wouldn't tell — but I'm sure Stephen'd let me tell you now."

Eugenia was once more astonished by the pace Clarissa showed in getting home; and the white mule even more so by the means she devised to make him keep up with her.

It was again the sending of a telegram which took her to Mentone. In this affair she would trust no servant, no telephone operator at the post office, nor even the nearer telegraph station at Roque Brune.

The message was again to Stephen:

"Send me specimen of her notepaper and writing. If not, wire colour and size of paper."

While she was dressing for dinner, they brought Eugenia a telegram from her husband:

"Will write to-morrow from London. My love to you."

"Is the last word in the plural," asked Clarissa, "or am I cut out already?"

After dinner she told her stepmother not only how she had first seen the Sergentson, and, in all likelihood, betrayed to Urquhart the name under which his former wife was living and the neighbourhood of her London house, but also of her own dealings with Benedetta Giovanelli.

"I should have gone to her house to-day, if I hadn't seen the envelope he slipped into his pocket as he came down the hill to us. Then I knew the first thing to be done was to telegraph to Stephen."

"What did you see in the paper?" asked Eugenia.

"The colour."

"Mauve, wasn't it?" asked Eugenia.

Clarissa nodded. "A woman's notepaper. He doesn't look as if many women wrote to him, does he? Well," she continued, "if Mrs. Lemesurier did use that sort of paper, I don't believe she used it or any other to write to Major Urquhart. If that is her paper with her writing on it, it's written to somebody else. I've got a fancy it's the letter they think she might have been writing just before she was killed. So I'm going to get it somehow. I've told Alexandre that he's to make Benedetta come and see me tomorrow at seven o'clock. She doesn't go to Major Urquhart's till nine, so he'll never know she's been to me."

"Unless she tells him. I don't see," said Eugenia, "how you can trust such creatures for five minutes. If she didn't lie to you last time, why then, she lied to the police."

"It's why she lied to the police that I'm going to find out. And I don't care a bit whether she's a liar or not," said Clarissa, "if I can get hold of that letter."

"If she gives you away," objected Eugenia, "he'll burn it."

"The money I shall promise her will depend on my getting what I want. Besides," reasoned Clarissa, "I don't think that devil of a man is in the least suspicious. I shouldn't wonder if he's never looked into a newspaper since he got back here, and doesn't know that anyone has even suggested that there was any letter to steal."

"But why should he be reading it now — after all these days?"

"If I had it, perhaps I should know."

"But, my dear girl," persisted Eugenia, "you've just built up a story out of your own head. For one thing against it, if a man so — so remarkable," she said, shuddering, "had got into the train at Nice, or Cannes, or especially at some smaller station along the coast, the police would have been able by this time to find somebody who'd seen him. That weird-looking mountain of a man couldn't hide himself."

"I don't believe they've taken much trouble yet. And I don't believe he went by the Marseilles route at all. I think he just started out as if he were going on one of his long, senseless tramps, and walked over, perhaps, into the Roja valley working up to the Col di Tenda; or, very likely, picked his way right up to Cuneo—it's not much over forty miles—and took train there for Turin, and thence by the Mont Cenis to Paris and London. As far as I could—with Baedeker, I mean, and the Continental Bradshaw—I've worked it out, Eugenia. During the time while Benedetta *didn't* see him, he could have done it all, with time to spare."

"And if he didn't?"

Clarissa was silent for a while. Her forehead, so hard to ruffle, was puckered.

"It can't have been a thief. Of course there may have been a man that nobody knows about. But I feel certain," she said at last, "that it lies between that terrible Urquhart and Stephen. Now, Stephen it couldn't be. Therefore, Urquhart it was—and I'm going to prove it."

Eugenia had of late been surprising her husband; now she surprised his daughter.

"That isn't exactly the spirit of scientific inquiry," she said.

Clarissa laughed.

"You dear, sharp thing!" she said. "You're getting awfully clever, aren't you? But, you see, I'm not a scientific inquirer. I'm a woman fighting—at this moment, hunting about for the weapon to fight with. I think I know where it is. But of course that's not the same thing as having it in my hand."

Miss Beltervane's private apartments in the Château des Nuages made a very beautiful suite, fitted and furnished with a fresh and delicate taste, giving an air of luxurious simplicity. Wishing to impress Benedetta Giovanelli with an interior such as she had never before seen, that her good faith might be at one with her interest, Clarissa gave orders that the Italian woman should be brought next morning to

her dressing-room, after passing through both boudoir and bedroom.

Having covered her half-finished toilet with her most striking dressing-gown, she dismissed her maid, and, making the country-woman sit, at once attacked her with much severity for the lies she had told to the *agents de police*.

Now it is doubtful whether Benedetta could even read, and very certain that she had read not a word about the Campden Hill murder. She had not, indeed, the least suspicion that the questions she had been asked bore in any way upon a crime which was in the public knowledge, but had feared merely that in some of his wanderings her mad Englishman, whose money was so small, but so regular, had brought himself within reach of the law, and would be perhaps taken away from her, if she should speak the truth about his last absence from home. Her surprise at Clarissa's knowledge of what she had told both to the police and to the young man who came, she understood, from the British Consulate, was raised to terror when she was threatened with the revelation of what she had said on the same subject to Clarissa herself.

Clarissa preached a neat and inaccurate homily on the penalties of perjury, proceeding thereafter herself to compound the felony by promising not only to protect the perjurer, but to pay her handsomely for the answers to certain new questions, and for the performance of further services unspecified.

"But first of all," Clarissa continued, "understand this: if the Englishman shall come to know through you or any other person that you have been to Les Nuages; or if he shall come to know that at any time I have questioned you about him or about anything else; or if he shall destroy the letter with the violet envelope which he carries in his pocket, whether by your fault or not, I shall never pay you one soldo. And more than that, Benedetta Giovanelli — if any of these things come about, I shall go myself to the British Consul and say: 'The woman that is the wife of Pietro Giovanelli, that lives hard by Gorbio, is a woman

of no account, but a very gross liar.' And I shall prove that it is so."

Benedetta was not merely frightened half out of her wits by these threats; she was lost in a superstitious amazement: how was it possible, she asked herself, that this young and beautiful lady should know either of those falsehoods or of that violet envelope?

Without Benedetta's protestations, poured out in a mixture of French and the Ligurian dialect of her native valley, Clarissa could perceive that she had prevailed. The woman might even for the present keep these matters secret from husband and neighbours; and, even if she did not, nothing was likely to come to the ears of the taciturn Urquhart before Clarissa had failed or succeeded in her design.

So she proceeded at once to ask questions; the replies amounted to this:

The mad Englishman had, thought Benedetta, brought the letter with him when he returned home on the morning of 25th October. The letter was, as well as the envelope, of mauve paper. There was a stamp upon the envelope — red. The stamp appeared very clean. The mad Major was for ever reading this letter, sometimes muttering over it. He seemed like a man that would find a meaning where there is none — an answer where there is no voice. No, he did not take long walks now, but would go out as if the journey should be a great one, only to return in half an hour and draw back once more the curtain of green silk from the picture of the beautiful woman, and gaze at it. Once she had heard him reading from the letter words which she could not understand; and then he had looked at the painted face and spoken to it — oh! in English, of course — as if it were from the painted lips his answer should come. Doubtless he was crazy — more mad than before he went away. Before he went away, it was always the great English Bible he was reading. Now, it was always, over and over, that letter of the paper faintly violet in colour.

"Will you steal that letter and bring it me?" asked Clarissa.

The woman turned deadly pale under her warm brown skin.

"For that I have no courage," she said. "He would kill me, and you would not get it. And it is always in his pocket, or under his pillow, I think."

There were a few more questions about Benedetta's hours and her master's. Then,

"What you have told me is good," said Clarissa. "What you can do for me, I do not know. If there is anything, Alessandro shall bring you my orders. If I get that letter, I will pay you. If after that you lose Major Evans' employment, you shall, in addition to the present, be paid the same weekly money, small but regular, which you get from him, for ten years. And there will be no work to do for it. Be careful no one learns that you have been here."

Eugenia had heard it all by the time they sat down to breakfast. They were exalted by the hope of doing great things.

They were still at table when Stephen's telegram came.

"Absent when message arrived. Mauve. Specimen posted."

There was more joy, and much plotting in quiet places, until next morning the letter came. The news was bad, but folded inside the letter was a mauve envelope. And the mauve envelope contained one sheet of mauve note-paper, and on it were written the few words in which Miriam Lemesurier had asked Stephen Gambier to come and see her on what had proved the last night of her life.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE COOLING SHOULDER

MIRIAM LEMESURIER was buried at Brompton Cemetery on Tuesday, the first day of November. To make bad worse, it was a clear, mild day.

Coarse curiosity had brought a crowd outside the gates. Tender memory had brought between twenty and thirty friends of the dead woman; Stephen knew them for the most part as frequenters of her Wednesday evening receptions. And there were besides another fifteen or twenty in the graveyard chapel whose excuse was acquaintance, but their motive identical with that of the larger and shabbier crowd without the gates.

And Stephen Gambier knew that of those many eyes few found anything more interesting to look at than Stephen Gambier.

For a man who had been so much regarded and so well listened to for reasons so different, the ceremony was an ordeal which he endured as a helpless prisoner suffers outrage. Before it was over, two women and at least three men that he knew had avoided his gaze—not ready yet, he felt, to insult, but already afraid to support. And even among those with whom he spoke in passing he found a difference. It used to be harder to get away from even casual acquaintances.

He had no work that day. The thought of his chambers was hateful. He had telegraphed the night before—as soon, indeed, as he had perceived the position in which the Coroner's line of examination had placed his reputation—he had telegraphed to Clarissa what he would never have said to a woman who had avowed her love for him; for he thought it mere justice that his accomplice should have

the opportunity of saying she did not love him, before hearing what men were beginning to say of him. There was about this girl, he knew, a sort of uprightness which might lead her further than her mere feeling could justify, did she know the injustice which fate seemed likely to do him. But deep down in him was a hope that love, rather than chivalrous desire to give even the unloved his due, would be the thing to bring her whole-hearted to his aid.

Aid he needed. Stenhouse's muddle-headed honesty had been a blow very hard to bear. He could not wish that Stenhouse had lied boldly in the direction of what Stenhouse knew, as well as man can know anything, must be the truth; but he did wish that Stenhouse had not been that kind of fool who gives his honesty against his own interest the flavour of dishonesty in favour of another.

So he had telegraphed to Clarissa on the Monday afternoon, when the inquest was at an end. This Tuesday morning, before the grisly ceremony of interring the dead woman, he had received her strange, and heartening reply: "When I write, the letter shall be my own."

Then, just as he was leaving his rooms for the funeral, had come her second message. All there was so far to be read in her part of the world she had read; and for the first time had said: "I send you my love."

If love it was, he kept saying to himself, until he saw the crowd of ghouls outside the gates of the graveyard — if love it was, nothing else mattered. Later he knew that, the truer the message, the greater for them both the import of every other thing that could be.

Now, coming away, he could not bear the thought of his chambers. So he tried John Street in the Adelphi, and found both Sukie and George; and consequently did not get Clarissa's third telegram until it was too late for her to receive his reply that night.

But when he got that third telegram, asking the colour of a notepaper, something leapt up in him like a flame. Afterwards he saw the bearing of the question; but just now, on the first stroke of the thing, he saw only that the

girl he had known so bitter and so sweet, so clear in honesty, so determined and clever in the falsehood she had compelled him to help her in concocting, was not only giving him the love he had asked of her, but had begun to take against the world his part as her own.

And just because of Clarissa's goodness, there came over him a tenfold disgust of the world, and of what it began to think and would soon say of him.

That night he wrote her a letter, that in which he enclosed the last note he had received from Miriam Lemesurier.

"Nov. 1st, 19—.

"MY DEAR CLARISSA,—I send you with this the notepaper you ask for. Your telegram was waiting for me when I got back to my chambers very late. I mean your third telegram. I shall reply to it by wire in the morning, but this letter I am writing you will not get, I fear, till Thursday.

"Your three telegrams have brought me great happiness. The first showed me that you meant to judge as well as write for yourself; the second, that you were not to be led into the opinion which I think will very soon be current about me. I went this morning to Mrs. Lemesurier's funeral, and there I saw signs enough of what is coming. And this second telegram had another chapter—the best message of all; a thing that seems so wonderful to me that I hardly dare speak of it explicitly. Will you repeat it by word of mouth when we meet?

"The third telegram suggests that you are working for me. From your inquiry about the colour of the notepaper, I can't help thinking that you are in the way to do so effectively. I was present with an Inspector of Police and the detective Morgenstern when the theory of the letter that might have been written was first discussed. There, in the very room, it was more convincing than anything reported in the papers.

"I foresee, in the event of your getting possession of

the supposed letter, a difficulty in which you may find yourself.

"Mrs. Lemesurier told me she would write a letter that night. I think that the letter was to have been to me. If you find it, and find that it was, please understand that you are at perfect liberty to read it. Your anxiety might be prolonged by a scruple in this matter; there might be some reason why you should wish to know at once, for my advantage, what the letter contains; so I leave it absolutely in your discretion to read it. But no other soul on earth must read that letter, if it exists, until I have read it myself.

"I know nothing of what you know, nor of what you intend in this matter; so I am naturally very anxious about your safety. Please do not let your sympathy with me lead you into danger. The man is, in a measure, I suppose, insane.

"The line taken by the Coroner at the inquest clearly showed, I think, that there is suspicion of me in the official mind. There was not a scrap of evidence against me. But, through the sleepiness of that old porter, what I had thought an excellent alibi broke down. The thing I fear most at present is that after having been definitely injured in public esteem, I should find no charge brought against me by the Treasury. A pretty little tragedy some clever writer might make of the man who eats his heart out, while none will openly and legally accuse him!

"You will observe that I do not insult you by saying I am innocent. When I went out that night to see Mrs. Lemesurier, I asked my friend Dr. Jermyn to stay till I returned. If he had done so, there would have been none of this trouble. I don't wish, however, that he had stayed; for then, perhaps, the second of to-day's telegrams, and particularly its second clause, might never have been written.

"In conclusion, I am Stephen Gambier, and I am as much yours as you will have me. If I tried to say how much, I might say too much."

This is the letter which Clarissa received on the morning of 3rd November, the day after the subjugation of Benedetta. It enclosed the envelope and sheet of mauve paper. Her joy in finding that her suspicion concerning the letter she had seen Urquhart cram into his pocket was so well founded, Clarissa shared with Eugenia. But the letter she kept for many hours to herself. And all of a sudden, when she read it for the third time, it came over the girl that she loved a man, and believed in a man just because he could write to her and of her without "gush."

Now this restraint in her lover was not, whatever she thought, her reason for loving him. But it was, as the world wags, a strong corroboration of his worth and sincerity.

She had offered in her few words so much — everything, without being fully conscious of what everything was — and he had answered in a way which made her feel still her own — neither seized upon with sudden harshness of possession, nor sugared with pretty phrases. Serious and sedate, he had accepted her word at its value, leaving her yet, it seemed, with the rule of herself till they met and spoke further.

"Will you say it with your mouth when we meet?" he had asked.

And very well she knew what she would then say.

On the Wednesday over in London, Stephen was busy in the courts. Here professional prejudice was on his side, so that he met throughout the day nothing to remind him of the inquests, except the too expansive cordiality of a man he disliked. He did not misjudge Lothrop, K.C. — did even dislike him a little less than usual; and laughed not too bitterly when the encounter was past.

"If he'd grunted his usual grunt and pushed by," he said to himself, "I might still have imagined it hadn't crept in here."

But in the days which followed it hit him from every quarter of his social compass. Again and again he had to tell himself it was absurd that men should think of

Stephen Gambier what they would not let him forget that they were everywhere thinking.

Absurdity, however, does little to soften insult. For all his courage, he began to suspect whispering behind and avoidance in front of him, even where he was unknown and unobserved.

He was, moreover, by nature a fighter, and had to endure the fighter's hell of enemies invisible and intangible. The Treasury made no move. The police, he thought, must still be looking for what they would never find — the man who had driven him back to Campden Hill.

On the Friday after the inquest, which fell upon the fourth day of November, he wrote again to Clarissa a letter she was not to receive till many days later. He did not attempt to hide from her how things stood with him, but said little of the suffering. One remark, however, he made, which pleased almost as much as it would have pained her, had she read it on the day it reached Les Nuages.

"Do you remember telling me once that there were some people whose last word would weigh with you against all the evidence in the world to the contrary? From the context, and from something in your face, I believed — I knew that you meant I was one of those. Being now sore and bellicose, with no enemy to take by the throat, I am so unreasonable as to hate the world because it is not as intelligent as the best woman in it."

CHAPTER XXIV

LORD BARGATE

LORD BARGATE was nursing his county, and incidentally hunting his particular section of it, when he read of "The Mysterious Murder in The West End."

The name Lemesurier caught his eye. He remembered the woman to whom Gambier had introduced him in the train.

Next day he saw Gambier's name in the papers, in this connection, and swore. He had admired the woman; he liked Gambier; but he regarded only the interest of his party.

One or two people in the world believed that Bargate loved his country so much that he had taught himself to endure party politics. It is at least certain that in his way he used them, and was in his own county a political force.

Just now he damned Stephen Gambier for coming within even arm's-length of a woman so foolish as to go and get her neck broken anywhere but in the hunting-field. For Gambier had been Bargate's discovery — Bargate, at least, thought so. Gambier had nearly beaten Milroy last time. Milroy was ill — sick unto death, it was supposed. There was no doubting that Milroy would resign his office immediately, and possibly at the same time apply for the Chiltern Hundreds; though Gambier had been so sure to succeed in a second contest, that Bargate would not have been surprised if the Enemy's Chief Whip should tell poor Milroy to hang on to the seat while he could hang to life. They could then fill Milroy's little office with a man whose seat could not be shaken.

Between the first and second sittings of the inquest Bargate found time to ride into Gateside. There he soon dis-

covered that even the first sitting of that cursed inquiry in town had been enough to set the whole of Gateside talking of the man who had come so near to representing it at Westminster. On the faces of some locally eminent supporters of the Government there was a look of satisfaction which reminded Lord Bargate of how one of his sisters would always smile with an added assurance of virtue whenever he or his brother chanced to be in disgrace.

The more important of his own people shook their heads, hoping the murderer would be found before the Coroner sat again. But even then — well, it was a pity. Certain matters affecting the sister island had made it almost certain that a group of Nonconformist tradesmen, allied by intermarriage, as well as united by hostility to the Establishment, would come over — or, at the worst, abstain from casting their votes. But now —!

"There's nothing against Mr. Gambier's character," said Lord Bargate, hating himself for even admitting to people such as these that a gentleman could be hampered by a possession so uncomfortable. "There isn't, so far, even a suggestion —"

"Ponder's crowd," said Amos Binns, taking from his mouth the cigar which Bargate had given him, "— Ponder's crowd will find suggestion in anything."

Ponder was a very great ironmonger. Binns was a middling bank manager. Binns' Christian name explains his knowledge of the many Ponders.

"It isn't what ~~is~~ that matters in an election here," he said. "It's the chances the candidates give us for guessing."

So, if Bargate was anxious on the Saturday between the two sittings of the Coroner, he was in a state of mind far worse on the Tuesday which immediately followed the second.

He flung himself into the first fast train for town. Before it started, Lady Bargate, who had pursued him to the station in her own faster car, put her head through the carriage window. His back was towards her, while he hunted in his seventeen pockets for his cigar-case. Turn-

ing in despair, he saw his hard-featured, hard-riding and soft-hearted wife holding it out to him.

"May the Lord deal with you, Moll," he said fervently, "as you deal with me."

Already he had a cigar out of the case, holding its sharp end to her face. When her hard white teeth had snipped off just the right cone, and she had neatly spat out the fragments,

"Look here," she said: "whatever you do, stick to Gambier. He'll pay for nursing."

His cigar alight,

"What else d'you think I'm going up for?" asked Bargate.

"You know Silas Beltervane, don't you?" asked Lady Bargate.

"The best pickles on earth, and the best dress-suits for the money?" asked her husband. They had a habit of asking each other questions, and got through life by taking the answers for granted. "The man that challenges the whole world to produce either a wider advertiser or an advertisement of his that isn't true? Do I know a grey little Government mouse all ripe to develop into a very big and dangerous opposition rat?"

"Haven't you heard, then," asked his wife, "that our precious Stephen of the golden mouth is going to marry the highly gilt daughter of Beltervane's Stores?"

"Where did you hear it?" asked Bargate.

"Would it do you any good to know? Why can't you just use what I give you? And will you ever find out anything for yourself?"

Then the train left her behind. Bargate, struck once more, as he had been stricken seven times a week since he married, by Lady Bargate's foresight, waved his cigar at her out of the window until it began to burn awry. When he had the fire in a perfect ring, he settled down to his problem.

Gambier was to be protected from disaster, because Gambier was worth more to the party than any other of

the rising men. If, as he believed, the other side had been hitherto inclined towards letting Milroy retain the seat, though incapacitated from tramping in and out of division-lobbies, this business of the murder was likely to tempt the Chief Whip into forcing a fight while Milroy's late opponent was under a cloud.

If Milroy, then, should relinquish the seat, there would be trouble over Gambier amongst the faithful, not to mention the Ponder gang.

Yet Bargate meant to support the candidate who had brought Milroy's majority so low. It was not only that he thought another candidate might let in Milroy's successor; the determining consideration in his resolve to stick by Gambier through thick and thin was the danger of souring the temper or breaking the spirit of the most promising colt in the stable, at the very beginning of his career. Better that Gambier, honestly backed by the stable, should once more just fail to capture Gateside, than that Gambier should be disgusted by lack of support from his own people at the time when he needed it most.

Again, Silas Beltervane was financially, if not intellectually, a political force. Having retired from the active list, he was known to be disgusted by the performance of the Government in more directions than one; had even been heard to say that the people was being hocussed as well as demoralised by the constant process of picking its pocket to soothe it with bribes. Beltervane, therefore, Bargate believed ripe for secession. If Gambier were about to marry the linen-draper's daughter, any support that Bargate could give to him in this bad hour would be accounted to him by Beltervane for virtue, and help to bring Lord Bargate into desirable contact with a desirable convert.

Two years ago Bargate and Beltervane had sat together on a Royal Commission appointed to collect evidence in a question on which the Government had already made up its mind.

With his mind made up, then, to put his money on Gambier, and incidentally to have a shot at roping Beltervane

into the true fold, Lord Bargate reached London on the evening of the Tuesday on which they buried Miriam Lemesurier in Brompton Cemetery.

Of the Wednesday morning he spent more than an hour with the Opposition Chief Whip, and the rest of that day and half the next in going the round of places where gossip is made. Thursday night found him more than ever determined to throw his whole weight on the side of a man he thought ill-used; for personal feeling now came to the aid of policy. That night he heard that Beltervane was back in town from the Riviera; so, instead of first calling upon Gambier, Lord Bargate wrote a note that night asking Stephen to dine with him and a few other men on the evening of the following Monday.

He would have made the dinner earlier; but he must have Stephen's acceptance first, and then ask the right men to meet him.

Late on the Friday he got it, and proceeded at once to write four other invitations, of which the first was to Silas Beltervane. The three others to make up his six were a smart solicitor who kept a kind of safe-deposit for family skeletons, a bishop who helped the world to believe the devil less black than painted, and a judge who really understood racing.

Stephen's acceptance had been written early on the Friday afternoon — that same Friday on which he had written a letter to Clarissa of which a passage is quoted at the end of the last chapter. In this letter he had mentioned Lord Bargate's invitation, feeling as he wrote the words like a child who tells his sister that "Uncle So-and-so is a brick, and doesn't believe I ever could have been so naughty as they say."

And that same Friday night, hours after Stephen's letters to Clarissa and Lord Bargate had been posted, Silas Beltervane called on Stephen Gambier at his chambers in King's Bench Walk.

Silas had reached London from Toulon on the Wednesday night.

On board her yacht in that harbour, Mrs. Templeton Cuyper had admitted with tears, which Silas had no right to set flowing, that she had lost hardly an opportunity, whether by pen or word of mouth, of spreading the news of dear Clarissa's engagement to Stephen Gambier. Fearing his daughter's obstinacy, Silas had wasted petrol and money in his haste for London. Arrived, he had told himself he ought to know what was being said here, where everything which mattered was said first; and had visited two of his clubs. At the second he had heard this—heard it when he was supposed not to hear:

"Poor old Milroy! Rotten luck, isn't it? They thought it was just an elegant appendicitis, but—well, you know what they found?" The voices sank to a sizzling burr, as if heard through a telephone disordered. Then: "Poor Milroy! Anyhow, as far as Gateside's concerned, it's a damned good thing that Gambier's as dead as mutton already—deader now than even Milroy will be in three months."

For all his knowledge of men, shops and finance, Old Symphony could be on occasion of an innocence excusable only by the bent of his mind. The kind of thing he had been listening to he called, in his present mood, public opinion.

It was on the Thursday night that he heard this vulgar tattle of two coarse political fools. All Friday he was wondering what he should do, discreetly eavesdropping for more of the same kind. On Friday night, furious with himself that nothing was yet done, he drove to the Temple.

Now Stephen had bidden, even commanded Susan and George to dine with him. He had given her the choice of several places fashionable at the time. But,

"I'd rather come to you. I love dining in your chambers," Susan had replied, with a pathetic little pucker at the left corner of her mouth. And since Stephen knew that Sukie took more pleasure in even a bad dinner with a *band* and the glitter and tinkle of a restaurant, than in the

best served in familiar seclusion, he knew why she now shrank from publicity as well as if he had heard what she said to her husband while they mounted the stairs to his rooms.

"I couldn't bear it, George—to see anyone look the wrong way at the dear man just now."

And George had answered, rather grumpily, she thought, that she had possibly saved herself some pain, but not Stephen.

Secretly conscious, therefore, that she had been less kind than her intention, she set herself to make up for it. The dinner in consequence was almost joyous, for Sukie made herself both pretty and amusing, and showed just the right amount and quality of interest in the Beltervanes and Stephen's engagement. Very artfully she had succeeded in getting him to offer to take her and George to see the dancer of the moment, when the servant told Stephen that Mr. Beltervane wished to see him.

Sukie watched her friend's face; for she had heard the visitor's name.

"In the study?" asked Stephen.

"Yes, sir. Mr. Beltervane said he wished for a few minutes' private conversation."

As the door closed on the servant,

"George," said Stephen, "take Sukie on and get the seats for us three—there's a good man. I'm sorry, Sukie, but you heard who it is. I promise to join you. A box, George—then we can squeeze Mr. Beltervane in, if he likes to come with me."

He went out, but in a moment was back again.

"I've changed my mind. I'd like you to stay here till I let you know you can start," he said, and went to Silas.

"There's going to be more trouble," said Susan.

"How d'you know?" asked George.

"Stephen's expecting it," she replied; and her husband nodded.

In the little book-lined room, with its bright fire and shaded lights, Stephen found Silas awaiting him. He went

towards him with his hand out — which he would certainly not have done, had not the shade on the electric reading-lamp put the face of his visitor in obscurity. He was half through some expression of surprise at Mr. Beltervane's being in town, when he found that his offered hand was not met. He cut short his words, went to the switch by the door, turned on the central cluster of lights, looked at Beltervane, and waited.

"I have come, Mr. Gambier," began Silas, "to tell you that I find myself compelled to withdraw my consent to your engagement with my daughter."

He spoke with his eyes full on Stephen's face; but when he had done, he found it convenient to turn them away.

"Indeed?" said Stephen quietly. "Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you," said Silas. "I need not keep you two minutes."

"But I may possibly keep you a little longer," replied Stephen, speaking with so marked a quietude that Silas began to feel a curious discomfort. "So I shall really be obliged if you will sit."

Silas did so, and Stephen sat facing him across the writing-table.

"First of all," he began, "I must know why."

Then, as Silas did not at once answer him,

"Of course," he went on, "I may guess, Mr. Beltervane, at your motive. I am making no pretences. But it is necessary that you, and not I, should say what has brought you here with such a purpose."

"I was too ready — I admit it — too ready to take your name and your public distinction, Mr. Gambier," said Silas bravely, "as sufficient guarantee of your fitness to marry my daughter. Recent events have put quite a different complexion on the matter. Quite apart from the worst things that have been said —"

Stephen, in the same voice that his opponent found so disconcerting, interrupted.

"What are the worst?" he asked.

Silas Beltervane shook his head, moving his shoulders as if he would deny responsibility.

The soft voice began again.

"But you cannot come here, rejecting what you accepted, Mr. Beltervane," it said, "and nod and shrug yourself out of responsibility for the gossip or evidence on which you act. It appears that you were about to say that, without the worst that is said, there is yet enough said against me to justify, not merely refusal in the first instance of your daughter's hand, but even the revocation of the consent already given to our marriage. Since I mean to hear all, I think we will begin with the worst."

Silas wished he had not come. But he resolved to justify Eugenia's belief in his courage.

"Since my case does not depend on the worst that is said of you," he replied, "there is no need to mention it."

"It has been mentioned," said Stephen. "Therefore it must be specified."

"I referred, then," said Silas, boldly, "to this affair of the *déclassée* woman that was killed the other day, in disgraceful circumstances."

"If you speak, as I suppose, of Mrs. Lemesurier," said Stephen, "will you be so good next time as to give her the name she has been known by, and to speak of her with respect?" Then, after a pause so painful to both men as to seem long, "Mrs. Lemesurier," he added, "was a very dear friend of mine."

This time the pause was filled with a sense of Silas' restraining himself from saying that such had been his thought.

"Well?" said Stephen at last.

"It is the prevalent opinion," said Silas—"not necessarily mine, you understand, Mr. Gambier—but it is the prevailing opinion, I find, that this woman met her death at your hands."

"Can you tell me," asked Stephen, "upon what evidence this opinion is based?"

"Upon motive — doubly strong —"

"How 'doubly'?" asked Stephen.

"Desire of the woman's money and of freedom from a mistress become — er — *génante*," said Silas. And though Stephen moved neither face nor body, his persecutor felt it was his age merely which saved his life.

"And the opportunity? It is limited, I think," said Stephen, "to the few minutes which I should have had at my disposal if, on leaving one taxi, I had promptly jumped into another and returned to the scene of the crime."

"That is, certainly, the general view. But, to speak now for myself: I think, supposing, for the sake of the argument, Mr. Gambier, that you did do this dreadful thing, it is more probable that you persuaded the driver of a private car to take you westward again from here; even possible that you had arranged for its presence beforehand. Nor do I conceal from myself that doctors are fallible. The death might have occurred before you left the house called Hillside; the return might have been to secure the supposed letter, and incidentally to put out the lights; or, again, the woman might have been killed, after she herself had put out the lights."

"Ah!" said Stephen. "Now, these are those worst things which you do not positively need in order to justify the withdrawal of your consent to my marriage with Miss Beltervane. Will you tell me the bad things which, though not so bad as those just stated, are yet bad enough in themselves to — to disqualify me?"

"The woman," said Silas, "was a *divorcée*. You had been associated with her, it appears, for years. Upon those facts alone I find myself justified in asking you formally to relinquish your claim upon Miss Beltervane."

Stephen Gambier rose from his chair and rang the bell.

"Gandy," he said to the man who came to the summons, "ask Dr. Jermyn to come to me. Give my compliments to Mrs. Jermyn, and beg her to excuse me for leaving her a few minutes alone."

"I must ask you for an answer," said Silas,

"You shall have it," said Stephen, "in the presence of my friend, Dr. Jermyn."

And then George Jermyn came into the room. When Gandy had closed the door,

"This, Mr. Beltervane, is Dr. Jermyn. Jermyn — Mr. Silas Beltervane. Mr. Beltervane wishes to withdraw the consent he gave some weeks ago to my marriage with Miss Beltervane. He states that he acted in ignorance of my character. To prove my ineligibility, he tells me that it is common opinion that I am the murderer of Mrs. Lemesurier, and that, even if that be incorrect, my association for some time past with that lady justifies him in refusing me what he had rashly promised. Do I represent your position accurately, Mr. Beltervane?"

Silas nodded, and said: "Yes."

"I have kept Mr. Beltervane waiting for my answer," Stephen continued, "in order that you may hear me give it." He turned to Silas.

"Miss Beltervane will tell you, sir, that when I first knew that such things as you have retailed to me were likely to be said, I telegraphed to her to write me a letter breaking the engagement. This was done in order that she might not appear to base her rejection of me on grounds so unworthy of her dignity. She refused to do so, both before and after she knew why I had suggested the rejection. I consider it is now a matter for Miss Beltervane to decide. I cannot consent to withdraw at your request, without wronging myself, and, by consequence, Miss Beltervane.

"And I wish to add that, in view of your tone as well as your words in speaking of the late Mrs. Lemesurier, I regret extremely that your age so far exceeds my own."

Poor Silas was very white: somehow Stephen's face recalled to him the same features with blood and dust on them. But he hardened his heart in his small, hot rectitude, bowed stiffly, and moved towards the door.

George Jermyn opened it for him — then shut it again before Silas had reached it.

"May I ask you a question, Mr. Beltervane?" he said.

"Certainly," said Silas.

"Do you really believe that a man like Gambier could do or be what is implied in your demand?"

"A man like Mr. Gambier? Probably, sir," replied Silas, "we have different estimates of Mr. Gambier's quality. I am sorry to say that I have little doubt that he did do and is what my action implies."

"One moment," said Stephen; and Silas turned to listen. "I shall not write to Miss Beltervane one word of this interview. If you can persuade her to discard me, you are free to do so."

These last words had a bad effect on Silas. He got into his cab and drove to his club, not in a mood somewhat softened by that passing memory of what Stephen had done for Eugenia, but raging with anger against the man who had loftily "permitted" him to persuade his own daughter.

Anger had made him thirsty, and he drank brandy and Apollinaris water—a thing unusual with him after dinner.

A waiter brought him a letter. As he opened it, he glanced at the signature. "Bargate" pleased him; for Silas had no prejudice against the class, and pleasant memories of the individual. "Dinner—a few other men" pleased him more; but "especially our coming man, Stephen Gambier. He has, some bird or woman tells me, the best of reasons for being on good terms with you"—that flogged his anger into so galloping a pace that he sat down in the full heat of it and wrote to Lord Bargate.

"Friday, November 4th, 19—.

"MY DEAR LORD BARGATE,—Not even the pleasure of being your guest can induce me to sit at table with a murderer. It is consequently unnecessary to go into my minor and personal reasons for avoiding the company of Mr. Stephen Gambier.

"I must decline your invitation — with regret because it is yours.

"Believe me,

"Your Lordship's very obedient servant,

"SILAS BELTERVANE."

Meantime, in King's Bench Walk, Stephen had said:

"Now, children, let's go and see the limb-twister."

In the cab, on the way to the music-hall, he added:

"Sukie, dear — these are the days for wearing your heart on your sleeve. Please let it be Prince's, or the Trocadero next time."

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAUVE ENVELOPES

It was on the morning of Wednesday, 2nd November, that Clarissa had questioned and subjugated Benedetta Giovanelli; two days earlier, that is, than her father's visit to Stephen's chambers in the Temple.

In the late afternoon, Stokes, returning from Marseilles with the big car, came out to the two women on the terrace, handing Eugenia a letter from his master, and delivering a verbal message to the effect that Mr. Beltervane regretted that business had compelled him to go to London without first coming home.

Clarissa watched her stepmother reading that letter — watched the colour die out of her face as she read. As she slipped the sheet back into its envelope,

"Can't you tell me, dear?" asked Clarissa.

Eugenia looked distressed, shaking her head.

"Better not, I think. He says he'll write to you in a day or so."

"How about the Cuypers?" asked Clarissa.

"They've spread it broadcast, it seems."

Clarissa clapped her hands.

"I'm so glad!" she cried. "And that, I suppose, is why he's off to town. Oh, my dear, soft-grey dad! *What* a mess he's going to get himself into!"

She slipped the sheet back into its envelope,

"Oh, I'm sorry, dear," cried Clarissa, contrite. "I'm selfish. But, after all, even if I didn't — you know what I mean — even if I didn't care, we do all of us owe Stephen a great deal, don't we? And the least bit of gratitude should be enough to make us all back him up, quite apart from his being what he is."

Eugenia was weeping softly.

"Silas doesn't know, you see, *all* that we owe to Mr. Gambier. And we can't tell him. He thinks it's just only saving me when I jumped out of the car."

"I should think that'd be enough for most people," expostulated Clarissa indignantly. And then, to soften the effect of her anger, kissed Eugenia's face with a passion she had never shown till these last few days. Then she stroked it with her long, smooth hands.

"To think of anything so sweet being spoiled!" she said.

Suddenly she thought of another beautiful face, sent into darkness, and her teeth came together, grinding a little.

"To-morrow," she said, "I'm going to get that letter."

But Eugenia was not listening. She was thinking sadly of her good little husband, with a bee in his bonnet which made him, even to his daughter, seem outrageously ungrateful.

Clarissa went indoors, plotting. She gave her maid orders about clothes to be packed in a certain trunk; about furs to be in readiness, and other small matters; so that the woman openly wondered to Christine whether Miss Beltervane meant to run off to her lover. She thought it a strange thing, and said so, that her mistress should show much greater interest in Mr. Gambier now that they were saying these awful things about him, than she'd ever displayed while everything ran smoothly.

Clarissa gathered all her ready money together, and borrowed as much more of Eugenia.

She sent for Stokes, and gave him particular instructions for the morrow. And after dinner she went to bed very early.

Next morning she received that letter from Stephen which has been quoted in full, and with it the note-paper and envelope for which she had asked him. There was now no doubt left in her mind nor hesitation of purpose. She told Eugenia that she was going to visit Major Urqu-

hart that very afternoon, and did not mean to come back without the letter. "I have a plan," she said, "which I think will work—work long enough to give me a good start of him on the way home."

"If he should find out, and catch you, Clarissa, he'd kill you as he killed her."

Clarissa smiled. "I don't think so," she said. "Anyhow, I'm going to chance it. I don't believe anything's being done about him, and any day he might burn it."

"I forbid you to go," said Eugenia; and the girl laughed, and kissed her.

"Of course you do, dear," she answered. "That's all right."

"Then I'm coming too. That you can't prevent," said Eugenia. And Clarissa found that she could not.

Eugenia was again upon the white mule when they started. Since they kept no horses at the Château des Nuages nowadays, and since the mule was in the stable a difficult beast to handle, but had a fancy for Alexandre, the second gardener, it was to Alexandre that the care of the mule had fallen.

It was therefore Alexandre that brought the white mule to the door, this Thursday afternoon, and Alexandre who put his mistress into that capacious and ornate saddle. Clarissa, eager in her plot, had started before Eugenia had her foot in the slipper-stirrup, and looked round to see why she lagged.

She was leaning from the saddle, giving something into the man's hand—something which he examined closely before putting it in his pocket. A second time Eugenia gave him something, which also he pocketed; and then Alexandre smote the mule on the croup with his open hand, uttered the wailing cry of the mule-driver, and saluted in his caricature of Stokes.

Clarissa waited patiently for the mule ambling after her.

"You won't be a bit of good to me, you know," she said, laying her hand on the bridle. "You might even be in the way."

"Not in yours, dear," said Eugenia.

By previous arrangement, the mule and his rider were to await Clarissa behind the big rock which marks the bend of the path ascending the shallow valley to the cottage where Vincent Urquhart lived with the portrait of the woman that had been his wife.

"Whatever you do," said Clarissa, very white of face, "do not show even the edge of your skirt round the corner."

She waved her hand, and thought anxiously of the weariness of waiting before Eugenia. And what if the mule were troublesome? She was very sure that if he should take a fancy for the grass higher up the track, nothing that his rider could do would keep him from it. But risks, one way or another, must be taken.

Clarissa was not long out of sight when Eugenia, looking back towards the Roman Road, saw a man coming towards her. Very soon she could see it was the man she expected — Alexandre. When he was close to her, again touching his cap, she said, speaking in French:

"Now I will show you how to use it."

Alexandre took from his pocket the Browning automatic pistol, whose habits had so often been explained to her.

Though a young man, he was an old soldier; a taste for firearms enabled him, with a few directions, to handle it far better than his mistress.

"Oh, *la belle arme!*" he exclaimed at last.

Then Eugenia let him well into the secret of Clarissa's expedition.

"The chief thing is," she said in conclusion, "that when mademoiselle comes from the house she will, we hope, have with her a paper which the mad Englishman has stolen. If he know that she has it, he will pursue. He must not get it back. *Histoire d'un crime a Londres, de quoi l'on est en train d'accuser M. Gambier* —"

"*Le fiancé de mademoiselle — ce brave monsieur qui a sauvé madame de la chute de l'automobile?*" cried

Alexandre, with splendid incredulity. But Alexandre had read things in both French and Italian about the Campden Hill murder which no London editor would have passed.

A little more she told him, and then repeated: "The important thing is that he should not recover this paper."

"Then bid mademoiselle hand the paper to me. I run and climb like the mountain goat," cried Alexandre, afire with the adventure.

"While mademoiselle and I," said Eugenia, "remain at the mercy of this ogre!"

Alexandre reflected.

"Then we set mademoiselle upon the mule," he suggested. "With a good smack to start him, and his stable in front, he will outrun this limping devil of an Englishman. I and the little pistolet automatique will take good care of madame."

Clarissa, meantime, was half-way to her destination. Already she could see that the front door of the house stood open, showing that Urquhart was at home. She stopped to take her breath, and drew from her pocket the mauve envelope which Stephen had sent her. It was, as will be remembered, addressed in Miriam's hand to Stephen Gambier. Clarissa had torn from the full sheet it contained the blank half. Inside this half sheet she had fitted a thick double sheet of her own writing-paper, giving a bulk approximate to that of the letter she had seen Vincent Urquhart thrust into his pocket. She now pushed this dummy letter into the band of her golf-skirt, in the small of her back, under the light woollen jacket which she wore over her blouse.

Then, very slowly and delicately she went on to the house.

In one hand she carried the spiked stick with which Stephen had fished her ring from the pool, in the other a little parcel tied with string.

So softly did she step that she had reached the door before Urquhart had heard the least sound of her approach.

The package tied with string held tea, such as, in

feigned good-fellowship, she had promised to bring and brew for him. And Clarissa, till she reached his doorstep, had imagined herself as a kind of chaste Delilah, working up to her golden moment by the small, kindly treachery of kettle and tea-spoons.

But two steps before she stood on that doorstep she had had a glimpse of Vincent Urquhart in the parlour of the splendid picture. He was sitting with his back to her, the portrait unveiled before him. But his eyes, as if just lowered from its heart-breaking splendour, were bent on a paper in his hand—a sheet of paper which her eyes, or, perhaps, her spirit told her was faintly violet of tint.

Now was her time. No Delilah for Clarissa! How much pleasanter—with still the right of the warrior to play the game of war as war is played—how much quicker and more appalling to come as the avenging angel!

She might need both hands. She stuck her stick in the ground just beyond the stone flag at the door, entered the narrow passage, and placed her package of tea in a niche in the wall which looked as if Urquhart had torn from it some very blue plaster image of Our Lady; felt behind her to make sure that the dummy letter was safe in the band of her skirt, and walked quickly into the parlour.

Urquhart, without taking his eyes from the paper in his hand, stirred a little. But not yet did he know he was invaded. And when Clarissa spoke, it struck her, even through her passion of the moment, that his instinctive action was pathetic.

For he leapt from his chair with a choked exclamation of alarm. She had hoped, when she addressed him with that bald, stern "Major Urquhart," that he would drop his letter, or lay it for a thoughtless moment on the table. But he kept tight hold on the two sheets of it and the envelope, crushing them together in his left hand, while he turned to the picture, and with his right angrily drew the curtain across it.

Then he turned on her.

"Why do you come here, dogging me?" he asked fiercely.

"I dog you," she answered, "because you are vermin — a savage beast outside the law."

She came round the table, pushing past him to the veiled picture.

"If you could kill beauty like that," she said, sweeping back the green curtain, "tell me what 'law,' or pity you deserve."

"I want none but my Saviour's," said Urquhart. "I had loved the woman. I slew her because she was unclean. She will sin no more."

"Are jealousy, anger and cruelty clean?" asked Clarissa, blazing on him, forgetful of self and danger. "Is the fog clean that kills the sunlight?"

Urquhart was dazed, and, after looking once again at the beauty fixed on that canvas, he shuddered with a moment's fear of what he had done.

"I saw the man come out of her house," he said, as if they were questions of the ultimate judgment that he was answering. "I went in, and there, on her table, was a letter, written to him that had even now left her." And then he too lifted his head, and his eyes blazed. "Is not that the mind of the harlot? I said she should sin no more — and now she cannot."

He turned his eyes on the portrait with an intensity in which Clarissa felt a queer mixture of insanity and sentiment. With a loud, clear laugh she jerked him out of it.

"How absurd you are, you theorising sentimentalists!" she cried. "You don't *know* that that lovely thing can't sin where she's gone. You don't *know* that she ever sinned, in the way you mean. But you do know that you killed her; you do know murder is sin. You do know that another man is likely to get punished for your sin; and you do know that there, in your hand, is the proof of his innocence."

"In my hand?" he cried, all abroad.

"That letter," said Clarissa.

He raised the hand holding the crumpled letter and envelope towards his eyes, peering down as if he could read through the folds and the grasping fingers.

"I have searched it many days," he said, in a thick, brooding voice. "Its words I know by rote, yet always the meaning I pursue escapes me. I have found nothing concerning the innocence of a man. I have found much importing the love of a woman. Such love leads to sin. But I search in vain for the sign of sin accomplished."

"What does it matter?" asked Clarissa. Her eyes were keen as a hawk's upon the flutter of those papers in the huge, knotted hand, wavering in abortive gesticulation. Yet she pitied the small egoism of this big creature ready to weep for the love that might have been his.

"Matter?" he cried. "It matters as the difference of Heaven and Hell matters."

"According to your funny theology," said Clarissa, "that has been settled past mending by your beastly hands. Oh!" she cried, her acting strengthened by the truth of her feeling, "it's wicked! The paint so splendid, and the lovely flesh so dead!"

She ran across him to the picture, threatening it with fingers parted and bent.

"I could tear it in shreds," she said, sobbing, "for not being alive."

His hands went to her elbows to pull her claws away. With a snatch quick as a cat's scratching, she had letter and envelope out of his hand; then, twirling herself like a dancer, was out of his reach on the other side of the table.

"And now," she cried, "the other man will be safe, and you will be hanged. If you really loved her," she said, pointing so keenly and dramatically at the painting that his eyes went to it at once, "hanging will be just going to sleep out of your own evil doings."

By this time she had his letter slipped into its envelope: she wanted him to see it last like that.

"Who knows?" she continued: "when they've hanged you, you wicked man, they might let you—look at her eyes!"

Vincent Urquhart looked at the painted eyes with that shine of a new pain in them. And while he looked, Clarissa's hand with the twice stolen letter went behind her back.

"Let me—let me what?" he asked, as if the girl were a Cassandra hypnotising him out of his theology. "What could they let me do?"

"If I were—were who lets people do things," said the girl, feeling pity for the man, even while she had no thought for him, but fumbled for centuries, it seemed, changing the two envelopes behind her back, under the woollen coat, "—if I were the person you're fonder of talking about than I am, Major Urquhart, I'd let you go and look at the real soul of that woman as she actually *is*. I'd let you look at the lovely thing for a few centuries—and then you'd perhaps begin to know what you are yourself."

She had done her legerdemain; one hand was in front of her, pulling forward first one and then the other edge of her coat. The other hand, turned backward, was hidden behind the long curve of her right hip, with the provocative suggestion of a big sister saying to a small boy, "Guess what I have for you."

Urquhart breathed deep, and turned upon her. The blueness of the eyes set in those reddened rims was, even to Clarissa in her rage of courage, terrific.

"You," he said, "are just another of his women. Give me my letter."

Clarissa spoke now with passion reaching beyond the occasion.

"I am his woman—his only woman," she cried. "If there was another"—and she pointed to the portrait—"you have sent her away."

"Give me my letter," said Urquhart. He went towards her, his big fingers hooking in front of him. Clarissa, her

hidden hand fluttering a little, backed towards the door.

"It is his letter," she said. "It is written to him. Do you think you can break my neck as you broke hers?"

"It's my letter — mine, to find out from it whether she was playing the wanton with him — whether it was in her blood and her spirit and her heart through all these years. Give it me, young woman. I have read and read and read it — all day and half the night — day after day and night after night. And I cannot tell whether or no she writes to a man that helped her in sin. I am sure of the sin — I know that these men do always defile the women they touch. But I cannot prove. Give me the letter. I will go and read it again, fasting on the mountain-top."

He looked again at the picture, with the gaze that sees other things. Then,

"He was with her. I saw him go," he said. "I was behind the laurel-bush, and I could have slain him with one hand as he went by me. But I let him pass, and he will drive the car of his sins down the years, because I held my hand."

Clarissa was in the doorway, between the room and the passage.

A little awed by his absurd sincerity, she said:

"But think, Major Urquhart, how he suffers!"

"For his sins — for his sins, do you mean?" he asked.

She increased the distance between them, while he awaited her answer.

"No, he suffers for yours."

He stopped dead, looking at her. "How," he asked. "can that be? I have not sinned."

"If you had been a good husband — if you had cherished the woman and her beauty, instead of pretending to know all about the will of the God that even your own silly beliefs must tell you is too big to be known — if you had tried to learn of her sweetness, instead of forcing on her all the sourness that was yours and not God's — why,

then, the man she wrote this letter to — this letter that's behind my back, and that I'm going to take away with me — this man, whose name's on this letter, would never have known her. Never, I believe, has he done her any harm. But, if he has, it's your own fault, and you are the man who's got to pay."

"Give me my letter," cried Urquhart; and, with one scrambling bound, was upon her, almost touching her, with crooked hands overhanging her, in the outer doorway. The hand which had been hidden behind her back came forward. She increased, by easy simulation, the appearance of the fear she actually felt, cringing from him as she held out the tinted envelope.

Urquhart snatched it from her, and Clarissa turned and fled. Crossing the threshold, she plucked her spiked stick from the ground.

As she ran, she put her hand behind her, dragging the stolen letter from the band of her skirt.

"If only," she thought, "he doesn't see the date stamped on the other! Everything else is the same. If only he gives me five minutes before he pulls the paper out!"

She ran well and lightly, but the path was rough, full of loose stones. There was no sound yet of pursuit. Running, she managed to open her blouse, and crammed the letter well down inside her stays. Somehow she had kept hold of her spiked stick. "If he catches me," she thought, "I will lunge at his face." At school she had fenced.

Nearly four hundred yards had she to go, of which she had travelled, perhaps, one hundred, when she heard a hoarse, agonised cry.

Her skirt hampered her when she tried to increase the pace. She heard already heavy feet behind her, and then another shout. She turned and took one look at her pursuer; then, deliberately stopping, she lifted the hem of her skirt to her waist, gathering the slack of it in her left hand, and ran as she had not run since the days of her hockey at school.

In the next hundred yards she gained, she was sure, more than she had lost by the delay; but her breath was already troubling her, and during the next fifty, though she dared not turn to look, she knew from the sound of his feet, that Urquhart's great, shambling limp was gaining on her. If only she could keep up long enough to get her second wind, she could run all the way, she thought, to Les Nuages. Urquhart was an elderly man; he might crack before she did. Meantime, her sight was getting dim, her chest hurt her, and the stones were bruising her feet through the rubber-soled tennis-shoes she had worn for silence in approaching the house.

Yet Urquhart was still fifty yards behind her when she ran lurching round the great boulder behind which she had hidden the white mule and his rider.

Eugenia uttered a sound between a scream and a laugh. Seeing that Clarissa could not speak and hardly see, she ran to her. Alexandre had seen the fugitive's gesture behind her, and ran round the rock.

"I've got it," croaked Clarissa.

"Get up, then," said Eugenia. She pushed her to the mule's near side, and held her hand for Clarissa's foot. And Clarissa, before she had even found her stirrup, shook the bridle, touched the beast with her heel, and longed for a spur. Sedately the white mule moved a few paces homeward. She had dropped her walking stick before mounting. She was trying, between her gaspings for breath, to make Eugenia hand it to her, when, from behind the rock came a sound—the sharp *ping* of the Browning automatic.

Clarissa found breath to say: "He mustn't kill him."

Alexandre came flying back to them.

"*Faut pas le tuer*," screamed Eugenia.

His brown eyes had shed their softness. The soldier's glitter had taken its place. He nodded to his mistress, saw the mule's sluggishness, and in a moment was thrashing it cruelly across the rump with Clarissa's stick. At the fourth blow, dealt as he ran beside the outraged, cantering

animal, the stick broke in the middle. Alexandre fell back and picked up the lower half with the spike.

"Servez-vous de ça, comme aiguillon mam'zelle. Piquez lui par derrière. Pour ce chien enragé, je tuerai pas. Maintenant, à madame."

He smote the mule once more with his fist, and stood in front of Eugenia as Vincent Urquhart, grown professionally cautious since that one bullet had lifted a little spirt of dust at his feet, came carefully round the bend of the path. There was a second report, and a splash of splintered stone rose from the ground a little to one side of him. Urquhart stood still, looking round. This was the other woman, not the one that had stolen his letter. Down the pathway, near its junction with the Roman Road, galloped heavily a white mule with a woman on its back. He was old, and felt old. Walking all day was well enough, but running made a pulse throb in his ears and dimmed his sight. Lucky, he thought, as he started once more in pursuit, that the mule was white.

Down there was the girl who had somehow tricked him of the letter which he could not read aright, and which he must go on reading 'till he had its meaning.

Eugenia and Alexandre watched him break once more into the queer, lop-sided run which covered so much ground, going down the hill after the white mule.

Alexandre raised his hand with the pistol, but Eugenia stopped him, telling him to put the thing in his pocket.

"He'll never catch Nenni. The man's tired already. Even if he did reach her, he'd be too weak to do any harm before we caught them up. Give me your arm, walk as fast as ever you can, and I'll see how long I can keep up with you."

Meantime Clarissa had her breath again. Just before her beast scrambled down the last rough bit of the path into the road, she turned in the saddle and looked behind her. The sight of Urquhart in pursuit brought a gush of terror into her heart—not for herself, but for the safety of the letter. Once in the road, she prodded poor Nenni

without mercy until he broke again into his favourite amble, took a hold of his bit and settled down to the business of reaching his stable, where, perhaps, this ill-treatment would cease.

She did not look round again, nor once check the mule's pace till she reached home. A moment's doubt she had, whether to force him to take the rocky path she had used afoot, cutting off about half a mile of the distance. But she decided that it would be unwise to interfere with the beast's willing homeward gait, and kept to the road.

But Urquhart, knowing these ways and by-ways even better than Clarissa, took the path she had refused, hoping by a great effort to cut her off.

Eugenia, escorted by Alexandre, was half-way home when she was met by two of her servants sent out from the *château* by Clarissa, and driving the unwilling Nenni for the third time this afternoon along the road he hated. With Eugenia on his back, and his head once more turned homeward, the mule soon left her escort behind.

She found a car at the door, a trunk and portmanteau sharing the front seat with Stokes. Behind him Clarissa, in a dark travelling dress which increased the pallor of her triumphant face, sat facing her maid.

Eugenia pulled the mule up to the car. Clarissa leaned out to her.

"You are a clever darling," she said in a low voice. "If it hadn't been for your making Alexandre come, with the pistol, I don't believe we could have done it."

"You've really got it?" asked Eugenia, flushing with pleasure at the girl's praise. Clarissa patted her chest, nodding.

"Yes," she said. "And I'm going right off with it now to London."

"But, my darling," said Eugenia, "there's plenty of time for the *rapide*. Why start now?"

"I've got an awful panic, Eugenia. The man gave me the horrors. I can't stay a minute, while I know he's anywhere about. It's the letter I'm afraid for. Perhaps

I'm silly, but I shan't rest a moment till I'm moving. I accused him of it, dear, and he admitted it quite calmly. He's rather awful. He was running after me for a long time. Did you see him again?"

Eugenia shook her head.

"And he hasn't passed here," Clarissa went on. "Stokes has been watching all the time. I shouldn't wonder if he's fainted."

Alexandre came up running, to take the mule. His teeth and eyes gleamed with satisfaction of his great deeds.

Clarissa gave him her hand as she thanked him.

"And never did I hear a more comforting sound than the ping, ping of the pistol, Alexandre. But I hope you didn't hit him."

Alexandre was very sure that he could shoot straight enough to miss even a big man like this *enragé*.

"I think you ought to go out with some of the other men and look for him. If he's wounded or ill, Eugenia, have him into the house, and nurse him. Send for Dr. Ambrose."

"You've grown very tender over the beast," said Eugenia, surprised.

Clarissa laughed.

"Tender — yes, because he's much more use to us alive than dead. If you got him here, Ambrose would arrange to keep him here till the proper people take him away. We want him."

Eugenia nodded.

"Stokes is driving me to Nice. Everybody in Mentone seems to know who I am. He's telephoned to Nice for a wagon-lit compartment for me and Melford. I shall have some dinner, dear, at the station place before we start. I hate the food on the train. So don't worry about me a bit. I waited to know that you were safe. Now I'm off."

The women kissed between mule and car. The car moved, but had not gone far, when Clarissa leaned out and called back.

"If they can't find him, tell them to try the short cut across the spur—about three quarters of a mile up the Roman Road—Alexandre will know the place. If he fell, or fainted up there ——"

And then she was gone, leaving Eugenia to wonder what Silas would say, if he met his daughter, or came home to find her gone.

It was dark that same night, when Alexandre and his search-party found Vincent Urquhart lying unconscious in the rocky path by which he had made his last effort to overtake Clarissa and the white mule.

They carried him to Les Nuages, and telephoned for Dr. Ambrose.

And because of the fear that Eugenia had of this gaunt terror in her house, Alexandre, full of pride, sat all night outside the sick-room door, with the Browning automatic beside him.

CHAPTER XXVI

FRIEND AND ENEMY

GEORGE JERMYN and his wife Susan were troubled about their friend Stephen Gambier.

When they were alone together, after their visit with him to the Cambridge music-hall, George told her of the scene between Stephen and the father of the girl he was going to marry.

"The worst of it is that the only man that he feels he cannot retaliate upon," said George, "is the only man who has the courage to say these things right out to him. Any other man he might kick down the stairs or bring a libel action against. But the girl's father!"

"Can't anything be done to fix the murder on somebody else?" asked Susan. "It's wicked to see him suffering like that. It *must* have been the husband, you know."

"I think he thinks so. He's told me the girl — she's out there, you know — is absolutely sure of it. He's got a man all ready to send out to discover what Urquhart's movements were at the time. The police may be doing something, but the Coroner, and apparently Scotland Yard too, were satisfied at the time of the inquest that this Urquhart man had never been out of his place at all."

"If he's got a detective ready to go, why doesn't he go now? It's no use letting the scent get cold, George —"

"That's what I've been telling him. But he's waiting, he says, for more information from Miss Beltervane. She's doing something, and he doesn't want to queer her game."

Before she went to sleep, Sukie said:

"Well, all we can do is to hang on to him. Go round directly after breakfast, George, and buck him up."

"I'll go, if I can," said George. "But as for bucking——! The poor devil's got his upper lip so stiff all the time, that you hardly dare offer sympathy."

As his engagements fell, however, it was past eleven o'clock before Jermyn was able to get to King's Bench Walk.

Mr. Gambier, Gandy told him, was engaged, in the dining-room, with a number of persons from the country—a deputation, he believed, from Gateside. Gandy would let Mr. Gambier know at once that Dr. Jermyn was here, if Dr. Jermyn would wait a moment in the study.

It seemed that Gandy had hardly closed the study door when he opened it again.

Mr. Gambier would be greatly obliged if Dr. Jermyn would come at once to the dining-room.

There, besides Stephen, he found four men, three of them sitting. Stephen rose from his lonely chair on the further side of the room, and came round to shake hands with him.

"I should like you to be present, Jermyn," he said, "at this little political discussion. Gentlemen, this is Dr. Jermyn, an old friend of mine. The meeting is a surprise to me, so you won't mind my having a friend." Then rapidly he introduced the deputation: "Mr. Ponder, Mr. Smallish, Mr. Greendyke, Mr. Brown. The gentlemen all come from Gateside. At the last election they voted for Mr. Milroy—they and all their connection. They are dissatisfied with the Disruption Bill; had intended, subject to certain assurances, to vote for me, if, as seems probable, Mr. Milroy's health should compel him to resign his seat. But they have been reading the account of the inquest into the terrible death of my friend—and your friend, Jermyn—Mrs. Lemesurier. And they have come to the conclusion that it will be to the advantage of the party to which they contemplate attaching themselves that

I should not contest the seat, but make way for a safer candidate."

He looked round the group of stolid, vulgar faces.

"Have I stated the position accurately, gentlemen?" he asked.

By a mixture of grunts and nods, the deputation admitted that he had.

"That is as far as we had got. They will vote for the man, you see, that is set up in my place—unless someone happens in the meantime to hint some filthy lie about him; but if I persist in my candidature, they will vote for the man nominated in succession to Mr. Milroy. I have no inclination to discuss the immoral confusion of ideas from which these gentlemen are suffering. I simply tell them that I did not commit this murder; that outside this room I will severely punish any man who hints that I did commit this murder; that I will not withdraw myself from the contest; that I have not been requested to withdraw by the accredited representatives of my party in Gateside; that what course I should take, if I should receive such an official request, is no business of the present deputation, which, so far as I know, represents at best a score of voters; and that in no case will I take any course which implies an admission of having done anything at any time which makes me unfit to represent in Parliament the ancient Borough of Gateside."

The little, fidgety man called Greendyke half rose from his chair, his face a mixed tremor of spite, timidity and second-hand holiness. But Ponder rose after him, with a size and a purpose so much superior that Greendyke subsided at once.

As Ponder began speaking, there was a sound of voices from the other side of the door—one obsequious, the other full of authority, and soon of anger.

"Before we accept that statement, Mr. Gambier, as final," began Ponder, with a roll of the eye which made Jermyn wonder what was coming, "I would wish to point out that it isn't so much the—the unfortunate doubt in

the minds of men as to who is guilty of the gashly crime to which you refer, as another matter, which has been, I may say, put beyond question by the evidence at the inquest. My connection in Gateside, sir, takes its stand on a high moral platform ——”

At this moment the angry voice without became so loud that it first drowned Ponder's and then stopped it.

“Deputation from Gateside! That settles it, and I'll settle your deputation, if my name's ——”

The door burst open, and Ponder supplied the missing words.

“Lord Bargate!” he exclaimed.

The intruder strode across the room, with his hand out to Stephen, and his face a large smile.

“Sorry, my dear Gambier,” he said, “to shove in like this. But I couldn't make that man of yours understand what a really important person I am.”

He turned to the deputation, looking it over. “Ponder, from the High Street; Greendyke, from Marvel's Lane, down Barside way — Smallish, and Brown the hatter.”

There was a little pause; then,

“What's it all about?” he asked. None being ready with an answer, “Oh, I've no political pull in this crowd,” he continued. “I know that well enough. I'm asking a question of fellow-townsmen about a friend of mine.”

And he glanced at Stephen with what Jermyn afterwards described to his wife as a sort of possessive affection.

To save time, Stephen told him briefly of the request made by the deputation, and how he had answered it.

“When you came in,” he said in conclusion, “Mr. Ponder was about to correct me on a certain point. He was saying that his connection takes its stand upon an exalted moral platform, and that it is not so much the doubt about the murder, but a certain other matter, established at the inquest ——”

There was a pause — short, but intensely painful to the moral emissaries.

"What's the rest, Ponder?" asked Bargate sternly. And, much as it cost Ponder to speak, it never struck him that he might refuse to do so.

"I was referring, my lord," he stammered out, "to the — er — the connection — the — er — the association of Mr. Gambier with a person — well, the divorce court, my lord, and all that; it's no good — a candidate who —"

Ponder's voice died to incoherence, but he had said enough.

"If the Empire could be saved from bursting into a million fragments by fifty votes such as yours, Ponder," said Lord Bargate, "it wouldn't be worth saving. You have a foul tongue, Ponder. You should keep it for your grog-shop, Ponder, or your chapel. You have used it to mention a lady. Here are two men who knew that lady."

"There are three," said Jermyn.

"Then I think," said Bargate, "that the deputation will be safer in Fleet Street."

The deputation certainly thought so, but Stephen checked its movement towards the hall.

"There's one thing more," he said, lifting a letter from the table.

"We've had enough, I think," said Smallish. But Jermyn was standing with his back against the door.

"This," said Stephen, with a sudden light in his face which puzzled his friends, "is a letter which I received this morning from your sitting member. I will read it aloud.

"DEAR MR. GAMBIER,— Our acquaintance has been slight. Had I been permitted to go through another electoral contest, the dreadful business would have been lightened to me by having you for my opponent.

"You have perhaps heard that I have resigned my office, on account of my hopeless ill-health. I was upon the point of applying for the Hundreds, when there came to my sick-room a report that abominable aspersions have been thrown on you in regard to a recent terrible event.

And then, while I hesitated, I heard that a clique among my late supporters had determined to rat to your party, but would at the present juncture do so only on condition of your being replaced by another candidate. I am sure your people are incapable of requesting you to retire. I therefore write to tell you that I have determined, not without contrary advice, to withhold my application for the Hundreds until you have smitten your private enemies hip and thigh.

“I hope I shall live long enough to enable you to do so before Gateside sees another contest. If not, I am sure you will bear me no grudge.

“Very truly yours,

“FRANCIS MILROY.”

The four gross faces were a study in bad colour. But no man of the deputation found a word before Lord Bargate spoke. And when he had spoken, the deputation desired only silent escape.

“Milroy’s a man, by God!” he said. “You—you others,” he added, turning on the four, “are vermin—and you may get out.”

When they were gone,

“There’s a postscript of Milroy’s,” said Stephen; and read it.

“Make any use you please of this letter—absolutely. Some people won’t like it, but it’s only decent. And, for your own comfort, Mr. Gambier, remember that there is only one other election that I have to stand.”

Bargate nodded. For a moment no one spoke. Then, “You’re wondering what makes me so hot,” said Bargate; and asked Stephen for tobacco. When his cigar was alight, “To get the stink of ’em out of the room,” he said. “Gateside piety wants sterilising. I know it’s a small matter—an absurd matter, Gambier,” he went on, “but it makes me damned angry. Look at that.”

And he flung down Silas Beltervane's letter — the letter he had received that morning, in which the writer refused to dine with the blood-guilty.

Stephen read it through twice. In his face Lord Bargate could detect no emotion. But George Jermyn saw the effort which stiffened its lines.

"Pretty explicit, isn't it?" he said quietly. "May I show it to — oh, I forgot. This is Dr. Jermyn, Lord Bargate. We were at Univ. together."

Bargate grinned genially at Jermyn.

"Of course," he said.

Jermyn also read the letter twice. Then he laid it on the table.

"You must go for him," he said.

"He can't," said Bargate. "Not if ——"

"He must, just because ——" said Jermyn.

"What d'you both mean?" asked Stephen, smiling.

"Lady Bargate told me," said Bargate, "that you were going to marry Miss Beltervane."

"I wonder where Lady Bargate heard it," said Stephen.

"My dear fellow," replied Jermyn, "everybody's heard it. And I've read it in at least three of those papers that people take care to leave in the trains."

Lord Bargate grunted as if in corroboration. "And you see how that affects your position," he said.

Stephen looked at him blankly for a moment.

"Yes," he said at last, "I see. Mr. Beltervane hinted something peculiarly vile, last night."

"He must have animus against you, Gambier," continued Bargate, "to take that line. Did he oppose the engagement at first?"

"No. He was very decent — very kind about it."

"You saved his wife from breaking her neck, and smashed your collar-bone doing it, didn't you? He had to be decent, one would think. Then why turn against you like this?" And Lord Bargate thumped Silas Beltervane's letter with his fist.

Stephen shook his head, and dropped wearily into a chair.

"I saw Mr. Beltervane for the first time last night. He was making a fool of himself. I liked the little man. I think I know his type. I think," said Jermyn, "that Ponder and Beltervane have followed the same line."

Stephen moved in his seat, ready, it seemed, to resent this association. Then he saw George's face, and leaned back again, listening.

"Ponder, you see, for the sake of Little Betheldom, pounces first upon your friendship with a beautiful woman, interprets it in terms of his own nature, and vaguely deducts the murder from it. But in his mind the real reason why you aren't fit to represent him and his in Parliament is the friendship.

"Now, Mr. Beltervane, I imagine, loves his daughter; she's an only child, and nothing is good enough for her; so he reasons like this: If a woman is murdered, suspect her. I have a pure daughter. The man affianced to her was intimate with the murdered woman; the murdered woman was a discarded wife, therefore of no character; therefore, murderer or no murderer, the man shall not marry my daughter. The daughter, taking a different view, makes him angrier than ever with you, and his anger pushes him on to believe that you got rid of the woman. He's a plucky little devil, I should think, and, having a prejudice which he calls an opinion, he blurts it out in a very abominable manner. That's the part I like him for, and I think it's going to be useful."

Stephen shook his head, but did not speak. To endure repeated reference to Miriam's life, rather than her death, as the centre of the injustice he was suffering, took all his self-control.

Bargate was fingering the libellous letter, and looking curiously at Stephen.

"D'you mean, Gambier," he asked, "that in no circumstances would you proceed against Beltervane?"

"Hardly that. But certainly not in these. On that letter, you see," replied Stephen, "I could get heavy damages out of him, even if I had done the murder, because he couldn't prove it. But I don't suppose I should alter Beltervane's opinion or anyone else's. If I could bring in evidence positive proof that someone else did the murder, I would proceed against Beltervane at once, if it were the only way of getting the satisfaction I want. But, if I had such evidence, then it would be evidence on which the Treasury could bring a charge of murder, and there'd be no need for me to attack anyone."

"And so you're going to sit still till that evidence falls into your mouth?"

Before Stephen could reply, Gandy came in with a card for his master. They saw the size of the card, and the surprise on Stephen's face as he picked it up.

"I shall be immensely obliged," he said, rising, "if you will wait for me a moment here."

He went eagerly from the room. In his study he found Clarissa.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE READING OF THE LETTER

It was the first time since she had filled her great place in his mind that he had encountered her with surprise.

She was a new vision, filling his heart with conviction of his own wisdom.

The dull London day, her plain and perfect costume, the dark furs from which her pale face looked out so eagerly upon him — somehow it all made for him a new Clarissa, more his than he had ever felt the old — a Clarissa he seemed to have known much longer and to understand far better than the girl out there in the sun.

When their hands met, she sustained her grasp, so that the long, slender hand, even through its glove, gave him a sense first of support and powerful friendship like a man's, with the secondary, underlying sense that the other thing which had come to life between them was neither denied nor suppressed, but rather acknowledged as a thing fixed and awaiting its proper hour of expression. He looked in her face, and found there faith preventing shyness. It crossed his mind that so his wife might look at a man when the world did him wrong.

She was holding the letter she had taken from Vincent Urquhart.

"I came to bring you this," she said, and put it in his hand, her own trembling with her eagerness. Her unusual pallor, he saw, was due, not to fatigue of her journey, but to the excitement of her mission.

"I took it from him on Thursday afternoon," she said. "I didn't dare trust it even to the post, so I just came with it myself."

He wanted her to tell him how she had contrived the seizure.

"Yes, yes!" she said, panting a little and pushing him towards the window. "But read it—read it. I must know if—if it's any use to you—if—if——"

"My dear," he said, "I told you to read it!"

"I know. It was kind," she replied. "And because I wanted to know if the letter would clear you of every shadow of suspicion, it did keep pulling at me all the way in the train. But I couldn't do it, somehow. It was like—like a treachery to her, you see, even though an enemy had read it in between. But I comforted myself by saying that, if it was properly dated and signed, and *because* it had never been posted, it ought to be quite enough to prove that that awful man *must* have killed her. Oh, please," she said, imploring him, "please read it now. I won't even look at you."

Standing in the window, Stephen Gambier read Miriam Lemesurier's letter—the words written some thirty minutes before she died. And Clarissa Beltervane sat looking into the red of the fire, trembling for she knew not what.

This is what he read:

"HILLSIDE, CAMPDEN HILL, W.

"22nd Oct., 19—.

"DEAR STEPHEN,—I am glad you came. There were some more things that I wanted to tell you, but could not. So, having seen you, I am trying to write them.

"You know I am going away early to-morrow. You will not read this till Monday morning; so I shall not see you after you have read it—at least not for a very long time.

"First, I want you to know that I have made a new will, leaving everything to you. It was drawn by and is in the keeping of Messrs. Jerome and Pettifer, not our old friends, Hidges and Handling. I somehow didn't want Mr. Hidges to know about it.

"I have done this because you are the best man I know; because you have been a perfect friend to me; because your friendship has somehow given me back thoughts, feelings and hopes that had been starved or strangled; and because, first of all, you have given a joy to my life that will outlive, I believe, the sorrow that belongs to it.

"I have loved you, Stephen, all the time and altogether. The reason I gave you long ago for not marrying you was at first the only reason in my mind — my natural horror of being married at all, after what I had suffered with Vincent Urquhart. Had you asked me again, a year later, I should have given you the same answer and probably the same reason. But then it would have been false. My real reason for saying no, that second time that never came, would have been that I know you do not love me — not like that. But I love you; and, being a fool, and not so unselfish as I should be, I can't help wanting you to know it.

"Do not be troubled about the chance of Vincent Urquhart having picked up my address. I shall run away, covering my tracks, before he has begun to move.

"I want you to be awfully happy. As I have told you, Stephen, I believe it was your happiness that I saw under a wide straw hat, on the platform at Rocca Bruna.

"If you ever tell her my story, give her my love. She won't refuse it, if she loves you as you should be loved.

"It is half-past twelve — Sunday morning, really. You have been gone half an hour, and I feel twenty years older.

"Your friend,

"MIRIAM LEMESURIER.

"There's such a weight on me, Stephen! I feel as if this were the last word I shall ever say to you.

"I take back all I said long ago against marriage. I couldn't retract before, because I knew that for you I was not love — but merely love's fore-runner."

While he read, not once had the girl glanced at him. The few minutes occupied by his reading seemed so long

to her that she was in a state between dreaming and waking when he finished.

Before she knew he had moved from the window, he was behind her with the letter in his hand.

"Clarissa," he said, "I have two good friends waiting for me in the dining-room—Lord Bargate and George Jermyn. I'll send 'em away. Bargate's been great—Jermyn always is. You won't think me rude?"

Clarissa smiled and shook her head.

There was a strange shadow on his face, she thought. He held out the letter to her.

"Read it," he said, "while I am not here. You wouldn't look at me. You are what a boy, for lack of words, would call a sportsman. I won't look at you while you read it; so I should have to go out of the room, anyhow."

Then he went. He found Bargate smoking, with his eyes half closed. Jermyn was walking up and down, swearing softly.

"I know," said Stephen. "Get off to your patients, old man. I want you to bring Sukie back to lunch here. If you can't come, tell her she must. Miss Beltervane is staying to lunch, I think. Mrs. Lemesurier did write a letter that night, between the time I left her and her death. Miss Beltervane stole it from Vincent Urquhart, and has travelled all this way to bring it to me."

Jermyn nodded and was gone.

"That ought to put things straight," said Bargate.

"I think it will," replied Stephen. "Bargate, you've been awfully good. Will you come back here to lunch? It's twelve now. Half-past one suit you?"

Bargate nodded. "I should like to meet Miss Beltervane, if you really want me."

Stephen caught his breath. "I do. I want to do her any honour—I want everybody on earth to see and know what she is. And I want you to go now, because there are things we must speak about, she and I. She's reading the letter."

Bargate had his thoughts—more and deeper than most

people knew. He gave Stephen his hand and went out.

Having closed the door on him, Stephen went back to his study.

Clarissa was still sitting by the fire, the letter, as if finished, in the hand which lay in her lap. When he made a little sound and movement towards her, beginning to speak,

"Hush!" she whispered. "I haven't done yet."

Forgetting his own words and her delicacy, he watched the girl reading the last sheet of the letter.

She enveloped it carefully, tenderly, and gave it back to him.

"It's beautiful," she said. "You needn't mind my having read it. If it had travelled the world for a reader, dear," she added after a pause, flushing a little for the first time since her arrival, "it couldn't have found one more reverent."

"Thank you," he answered.

"But there's a thing I want to say. You are—we're going to be married, aren't we?"

The breaking of her sentence, and the sudden simplicity of her usurping question had for Stephen a mixed poignancy of fear and sweetness.

Even the pang was twofold: what would she feel if he told her the facts about Miriam and himself? And could any maiden see another woman in the light of truth, when such facts had been told her? Yet, to the girl asking with that adorable directness: "We're going to be married, aren't we?" no honest man could give anything less than fact. For, though facts, he knew, can lie, you can build truth with no other bricks.

She looked right in his eyes as she asked her question; and she found there what she called to herself afterwards a shining gravity.

"Yes," he said. "We're going to be married, Clarissa."

"Well, that beautiful letter has made me think a good deal. If you let me turn it loose in my mind, it will make me think a great deal more. If you ask me, I will prom-

ise never in all my life to say another word about it. I am not quite sure if I am strong enough over myself to keep from thinking of it again. But I'll promise to think of it as little as ever I can—if you say so. If I am ever to speak—if it is mine to think of when I please, I'd rather ask my questions about it now."

Stephen took the letter from her and laid it on the table. Then he sat down, facing the girl, and laid his hand upon the letter.

"She is dead. About an hour before she died, expecting to live a long time, she said that to tell half was worse than to tell nothing. Again, before I left her, she said that some day I was to tell you all about her. In this," he went on, raising his hand and letting it fall again gently on the letter, "she assumes that some day I shall tell you. While she lived, I do not think that I should ever have told you. But she is dead, and all that I know, you shall know."

There followed a short silence, she waiting, he, it seemed, hesitating.

"I want you to do me a kindness first, Clarissa: to tell me," he said, "all about getting the letter; and then, the exact truth about your change of mind, or the making-up of it."

She looked at him gravely.

"Why must my tale come first?" she asked.

"You might refuse to tell it, after hearing mine. Be kind to me, Clarissa."

So she told him, carefully and, as she warmed to it, rather vividly, the story of Vincent Urquhart's confession of the murder, and of how she had stolen the letter. When she had done,

"And now," said Stephen, "about you?"

She had not forgotten, and did not pretend to forget, the second thing he had asked her to tell. Her colour rose, but she spoke with a courageous calm.

"Before you left, I told you—didn't I?—that you were the most interesting person I had ever met. I said

I liked talking to you, and going for long walks with you very much indeed. But—but something held me back—some streak or layer in me seemed hard. I thought I didn't know—couldn't understand myself. When you were gone, I began to have—well, suspicions of myself. It's all very absurd, I suppose, and silly. But directly they touched you," said Clarissa, a flame lighting somewhere in her so that it shone through,—“directly the nasty, babbling newspapers even only said that *your* friend had been cruelly killed, I felt inside me the horridest kind of anger—angriness that wants to kill somebody, though it doesn't know who ought to be killed, you know. Then it leaked out, or trickled into me, that people might think it was you—very soon after, that they did think so, and were secretly saying that they thought it. Oh, Mr. Gambier,” she said, her very earnestness taking her back to her earlier form of address, the Christian name, for all its odd sweetness in her own ears, being yet stiff in the utterance, “—Oh, Mr. Gambier, the—the rage in me was so bad, that I just said to myself I'd go and *do* something. It seemed, you see—not seemed only—it *was*——” the tangle of her sentence checked her.

“What *was*?” asked Stephen, in a mere thread of a voice.

“That you belonged to me—in some queer sort of way. Really, it seemed as if you were mine, and that I'd got to hurt anyone that hurts you.”

“Do you feel all that about me?” asked Stephen. And his voice was so level, his face so non-committal as he asked the question, that Clarissa, doubting, flushed painfully.

“You mustn't—mustn't criticise my words,” she said. “You must not, I mean, be precise about them. I am trying in an awfully clumsy sort of way to tell you what—what I—what happened,” she said. “It's all a feeling,” she added,—“but a great feeling.”

“It's a feeling, Clarissa,” he answered, “that makes me feel a king. Do think that I love and admire you above

all the world and beyond words. If I'd done twenty murders, I would tell you them all—all about them all. The most I have to do, however, is to tell you the story of Miriam Lemesurier. While I tell it, think—see in your mind Sergentson's picture. She was like that, inside and out."

Said Clarissa: "I will think of the picture."

She closed her eyes.

"I can see it," she murmured. "Go on."

So Stephen Gambier sat and told the story of Miriam Lemesurier—told it, until he himself came into it, with imagination and at least the just partisanship of Miriam's advocate. Therefore the road of his narrative was rough; even the words of it difficult. But, in the end, Clarissa had learned what she had somehow felt in, rather than gathered from, the letter she had just read. But her first feeling, when he had managed to make the matter plain, was of anger against her own man, rather than of contempt or condemnation of the woman she had once seen and never known. Her pity for the life and beauty which had, as it were, flashed by her in the railway station of Roque Brune—she had even noted how the splendid, unknown woman had in her letter called it as they shout it there along the platform: "Rocca Bruna—Rocca Bruna!"—her pity for the sudden extinction of that glowing vitality made her take the side that the man was giving her. But Clarissa Beltervane is of a type very rare—if of a type at all. So it came that, rebelling against her own impulse, she said suddenly:

"That isn't the way Mrs. Lemesurier would have told me—if she could have told—now, is it?"

And, when Stephen did not answer, feeling hot as well as unhappy,

"I mean," said Clarissa, "she would have said—I *think* she would have said you were not being fair to yourself."

"How can I tell? I wish so desperately that you should think well of me," replied Stephen, "that I'm very careful not to plead. It happened, my dear—and it lasted

just as long as I have told you. I wish to God you need never have been troubled by the knowledge. But you have worked for me—you have almost said that you love me; the question has been presented to your mind; and I won't have you know less than you have the right to know. When I look at you, I wish I had no such story to tell. As it has all tumbled together, however, with you mixing in and doing the one effective thing that could be done to save my good name—how can I not tell all you ask me, even if you damn me for what's told."

Clarissa looked at him with eyes so enigmatical that he found himself in physical pain.

She held back from speech till he cried out—softly—but yet crying:

"How can I tell—how can I know whether I'm too soft or too hard on myself? If the umpire in a cricket match is a gentleman, Clarissa, and knows he knows cricket, but also knows he wants A to win, how can he help giving the shadow of a ghost of the benefit of the doubt to B? Even in saying that, I look as if I were trying to make you think that the sin, or the wrong, or the unkindness was a little less mine than that dear woman's. But I'm not. I don't know. I'm not God. And just now, by you——"

He stopped a moment, laughing in an odd sort of way, Clarissa thought.

"Just now I'm only being frowned at by your eyes, because you say I'm being too hard on myself."

"Oh!" said Clarissa. And she too laughed. But it was a queer, crowing little sound of enjoyment, which puzzled the man who was fighting, he thought, the biggest case of his life. But he found her so much better at every step—even in those steps of which he could not see the direction—that he fought on, even when his battle was won.

"Anyhow, I've told you as well as I could. You say I press too hard on myself. Give me too, then, the benefit of the doubt."

He was leaning forward so cravingly—his eyes had a

fire of pain in them so burning, that Clarissa stretched out her hands—even her arms a little—though she could not get them fully extended in that first invitation.

He took the hands, not daring yet to enter the arms.

“Benefit of the doubt!” she said. “Stephen, you have the benefit of knowledge, to begin with, and of my love to go on with. How could you help loving her a little? How could she help loving you a great deal? According to what I heard a great clergyman say once, she had the best of it.”

Stephen, nearly stupefied by these things falling upon him, simply asked “why?”

And Clarissa smiled so that for a moment he lowered his eyes—but only to lift them again.

“Because she loved the more. D’you think I am going to wish the beautiful thing had never been your friend, Stephen? Why, I am going to have always the same splendour-advantage over you.”

Stephen did not think so. He may even have said that so it was not. But this they agreed to leave an open question.

Clarissa had grown, in this half-hour, strangely bold.

“Stephen,” she asked, a little while before Gandy told them that luncheon was ready,—“Stephen, after she made you be friends instead of lovers, did you know she went on feeling as—as she says in the letter?”

“There were three years, you see, of the simplest friendship, open to the world. So I really thought at last it had been best and happiest for her too.”

“Was it the best for you?” asked Clarissa.

“Oh, yes,” said Stephen.

“Of course. You told me. She knew how you hate secret, underhand things. So she kept all the secret part that was left in her own heart. She must have been very brave.”

“She was brave,” he said softly.

“Let me be quiet a little while,” she said. “I shall think better if you’ll smoke.”

She leaned back in the low chair by the fire, their lids so low over her eyes that he thought them shut, and while he smoked the one cigarette that was the measure of her reverie, he watched her still face, thinking of the courage of this second woman that had loved him.

The face had less colour than in the sunshine that falls on the blue sea, the blue sky, the grey-green olives and the brown hills. Its eyes were veiled. The soft sweep of its long lines told somehow a story of suffering undergone since he had seen it last—even, he thought, of a pain it had not worn the mark of when she came to him with her spoil, an hour ago. Was it her own pain, born of his tale, or was it pain of his pain that she felt?

She had taken it all with an air at once so simple and so superb, that he felt he had spoken at once to a man's understanding and a woman's tenderness; and found himself, by consequence, smaller in his own conceit than ever in his life before. It was a long time, he thought, since he had known that he loved her; but now, when he was assured of what he desired, he knew for the first time how great a thing he had asked.

When he dropped the end of his cigarette into the fire, she opened her eyes on him.

"In a sort of way," she said, "she died for you and me, Stephen. It made me know."

"And me," he answered.

"But you loved me before, didn't you?" she asked.

"Yes. But it has made me know, Clarissa, what I was loving."

"I want you to promise me something," said Clarissa. And when he nodded assent, "If it ever comes into your head to wonder what Mrs. Lemesurier would have said, or thought, or done," she continued, "promise to ask me what I think she would have done, or said, or thought. I feel as if I knew her."

Five minutes later Gandy announced lunch and Mrs. Jermyn.

CHAPTER XXVIII

URQUHART ESCAPES

SUKIE and Clarissa, after introduction, had retired to a bedroom, because Sukie — so she declared — hated lunching in her hat. Stephen, who had heard her swear she could eat no lunch without it, knew that she wanted alone with the other woman those few miraculous minutes in which friendship is made.

Thick as thieves they came back to find Lord Bargate talking with Stephen.

Presented to Clarissa, his lordship took care to sit beside her at table. Conversation not flowing too easily at first.

"You're taking us in — that's why you won't talk, Miss Beltervane," he said suddenly; for Sukie kept Stephen occupied with her chatter.

"Do you mean I'm deceiving you?" asked Clarissa.

"I mean that I and Mrs. Jermyn, being both new to you, are being examined, absorbed and judged," he replied. "Examined, too, from a single point of view — which minimises our chance of getting justice."

"Perhaps somebody has told you, Lord Bargate, that I have just come in a hurry from the Riviera."

"Yes," said Bargate, "and told me why you came."

"Then it wasn't hard to guess that just now I have only one point of view. I am trying to understand you and Mrs. Jermyn as friends of Mr. Gambier's. And I don't think you are going to suffer from the narrowness of my outlook."

"Which means ——?"

"That I assume you both to be as good as your goodness to him makes you seem. You are good to him, aren't you?"

"I am," said Bargate, "when I get a chance. Anyhow, I've quarrelled with your father about him."

She stood the test; went a little whiter in the face, but neither started nor raised her voice.

"What has my father been doing?" she asked softly.

"He had an interview with Gambier; asked him to give you up—so I understand. Knowing nothing of this, I asked Mr. Beltervane to dine with me, mentioning Gambier as my special guest. He refused in a letter accusing Gambier of Mrs. Lemesurier's murder."

"Mr. Gambier," said Clarissa, "might not like you to tell me that."

"He wouldn't. He'd want you never to know. I want you to know. So I tell you."

Here Stephen interrupted. Not knowing what was being said, but catching sight of Clarissa's face, he broke in with a question about Eugenia.

Clarissa's colour came back, and the smile to her lips.

"Just splendid," she cried. "Awfully well, awfully jolly, and as clever as clever. I'm afraid I may have swanked a little," she added, laughing, "about getting that letter; because I should certainly have made a mess of it, if she hadn't brought the mule and the gardener and the pistol into it."

Lord Bargate wanted to hear. Susan Jermyn wanted to hear. So Clarissa told them of the white mule, Alexandre, Eugenia and Vincent Urquhart. Trusting the woman because of that secret five minutes, and the man because she liked him and believed him strong in Stephen's cause, she told her story of that Thursday afternoon vividly and sympathetically, as comment died down.

"What became of this Urquhart—after you'd got safe home?" asked Bargate.

"He seemed to get lost. The last thing I did was to tell them to send out a search-party for him. I thought he might be hurt, and that they'd better get hold of him and keep him till he was wanted."

"That's good," said Bargate. "A man of that age, in

that mood, might do anything, from paralysis to suicide. Your family, Miss Beltervane, seems full of resource in emergency."

"I don't think we're particularly clever," the girl replied. "But you see, Lord Bargate, we were all very full of what Mr. Gambier had done for us. Perhaps that put us on our mettle."

"What did he do?"

"He saved my stepmother from a very dreadful accident — saved her life, I should think," said Clarissa.

Bargate asked if she had heard how he nearly turned Frank Milroy out at Gateside. From this they got to Ponder's deputation, and Clarissa must see Milroy's letter. It was the end of the meal, and cigarettes were alight, and Bargate, seeing her struggle to keep back the tears while she read, rose and went to the window. Clarissa gave the letter back to Stephen, and, leaving him talking to Sukie, deliberately followed Bargate.

"Why was it," she asked, going back to the subject of her father's accusation, "that you told me what Mr. Gambier doesn't want me to know?"

"Till you came," he replied, "we thought the only way to squash the slander that's going about was to bring an action for libel. Your father, in a fit of temper — you will forgive me? It's the kindest explanation — your father has given me the opportunity. I doubt whether Gambier would have taken that opportunity."

"He'd have had to take it. But now — surely it will be easy enough to prove that Major Urquhart did it. Won't it be easy, Lord Bargate?"

"Yes — if he were here and under our thumb — no doubt," he answered. "But I want you to bear it in mind that I have that letter, and that letter, if need should arise, will have to be used."

She looked at him very straight and keenly.

"Yes," she said. "It would have to be used, of course, if it was the only way of proving that he didn't do what he couldn't have done."

"Then, about this other letter—the one you brought home, Miss Beltervane—what, exactly, does that establish?"

"It's dated inside, and there's something said about what time it is while she is writing. Though it is stamped, it hasn't been post-marked. I think that shows that Major Urquhart did go to Campden Hill that night. The letter also tells Stephen about a will she has kept secret from him, by which she leaves all her money to him. And it tells why she wouldn't marry him, when he asked her long ago. And it says she hopes he will marry me."

Clarissa paused. Then, controlling her voice with an effort,

"Doesn't it prove enough?" she asked.

"Yes—for Gambier," said Bargate, turning his eyes from her. "But I doubt whether just proving that this Urquhart had been there and had stolen a letter addressed to somebody else would hang him."

"But he told me himself that he had done it. I had accused him, and he admitted it—almost lightly. It wasn't his guilt that troubled him. He had taken the letter, and had been reading it and re-reading it ever since, hunting hungrily for what wasn't there."

Bargate asked her bluntly what she meant by that.

"I can't understand how love goes in such hideous shapes," she began.

"It does sometimes," he answered kindly, and a little abashed.

"Though he's a horrible person, and though I wouldn't lift a finger to save him from being hanged, I'm sure he has kept on being in love with her in his awful way. And so—which ought to be absurd, though I suppose it isn't—so he was hunting and hunting in that letter for some phrase that should prove her wickeder even than he thought her. He told me so. And he said: 'I killed her'—no, *slew*, it was—'I slew her.'"

"You can swear to that?"

Clarissa shuddered at the thought of the witness-box.

"Oh, yes," she replied bravely. "But I have an idea, that, if they get him over here and try him, he'll say he did do it. Wouldn't that save having to read — read aloud that letter — Mrs. Lemesurier's letter, I mean?"

"I don't know. But I do know," said Bargate, "that Gambier ought to take a taxi down to Scotland Yard now, and show this letter to some lazy devil of an official there. They'll want to see you, most likely. And then perhaps they'll do something."

"Does anybody know," asked Clarissa, "that they haven't been doing anything? Has anybody asked them?"

"Gambier wouldn't, you know. It'd be like admitting there was something being said or thought against him."

"But there is," said Clarissa.

Bargate nodded emphatically.

"That," he said, "is why I told you about your father's letter to me. I want you to make Gambier hit back and hit hard, every time. The more people these rumours reach, the worse for everybody concerned."

"Therefore worst for me," said Clarissa, calmly claiming largest property in Stephen Gambier. "We'll go to Scotland Yard. You tell him, and I'll back you up."

Bargate moved towards Stephen, but Clarissa touched his arm.

"Everybody high up will be away. It's Saturday afternoon," she said.

Bargate, reaching Stephen, asked: "Who's the man you saw when you first heard of the crime, Gambier — at Scotland Yard?"

"Sir Robert Lestock," replied Stephen.

"Where's your telephone?"

Stephen rang the bell, and Gandy appeared with a promptitude rather surprising.

"Show Lord Bargate the telephone," said Stephen. Bargate went out, and Clarissa looked at Stephen. Sukie went over to the window, and looked out.

"I don't think that was quite nice of you, Stephen," said Clarissa softly.

He turned sharply on her, caught her smile, and changed his frown to a laugh.

"I'm a beast," he said. "But — well — I wish people wouldn't mess about with my affairs."

"Oh!" exclaimed the girl. "Isn't that just what I've been doing?"

"You're not Bargate," objected Stephen.

"But Lord Bargate," retorted Clarissa, "as it happens, is just exactly me — this time. And if I'd asked you for the telephone, you'd have shown me, or told me yourself."

He looked at her, and his eyes made her pitiful.

"I've had rather a rotten time lately," he said. And then she knew how much she loved him.

Sukie was there, so Clarissa just touched the back of his hand, strokingly, with the fingers of her right. Whereafter they talked to the woman in the window about why George hadn't come to lunch.

It was patients — patients in hotels. Patients in hotels were good payers, *when* they paid; but they weren't good patients, because they never stayed long enough to get better; they went away ill, or they stayed till they died.

George had a new patient, with a nervous disorder, it appeared — a woman with a kind of moral jim-jams; a woman who couldn't sleep for the belief that she had gossiped so as to do harm, and hurt people. She had meant nothing at all, had, in fact, only repeated what she had thought she had a clear social right to repeat. Her suffering was, George said, so sincere, that she was learning discretion. She would not even tell George who were the high and mighty ones offended. She had but said two persons were engaged to be married — and there had come upon her, far away from town, an awful avalanche of a father, raging because she had repeated what he had told her himself. There had been a dreadful "scene," and she had come to town, because she couldn't bear the yacht and the Mediterranean any longer. And —

Here Clarissa laughed aloud, interrupting what Stephen thought Sukie's very silly tale.

"That's Mrs. Templeton Cuyper," she cried. "And the 'avalanche,' my dear dad gone dotty. It was he told her Mr. Gambier and I were engaged, three weeks ago, when I wasn't in a hurry to have it announced. Last Tuesday he heard Mrs. Cuyper's yacht was at Toulon, and went there. Tell your husband, Mrs. Jermyn, that I'll call on his patient and cure her for him, and that he shall keep all the credit."

"How?" asked Sukie.

"I shall just tell her that she not only wasn't to blame, but that she has saved me a lot of trouble. If the silly world hadn't learned through her that I'm going to marry Mr. Gambier, I should have had to put it in all the silly newspapers."

"Why?" asked Stephen.

"Because people are saying silly things about you. Ask Eugenia if I didn't tell her I would."

Then Lord Bargate came back.

"Bobby Lestock's actually there now. Luck, isn't it? Seems he'd gone, and ran back for something or other. I got him on the bounce. When I told him what it was, he said he'd wait there twenty minutes for you."

Clarissa's remark about Mrs. Cuyper and the newspapers had sent a shock of joy through Stephen; and Bargate, who had intended compelling him to instant action, was surprised when he encountered nothing but thanks and acquiescence.

Sukie promised to wait, and make tea for them when they returned. So Clarissa, Lord Bargate and Stephen drove in a taxi-cab to Scotland Yard.

During the short journey, the men spoke little, Clarissa only once. Bargate was looking out of the window when she laid her hand on Stephen's arm.

She was thinking, and knew he was thinking of the necessity of submitting the letter—the letter of which she felt almost as if she had written it herself—to official, and perhaps ultimately to public scrutiny.

"It's got to be done, dear," she said, in a voice very

tender, "for her sake and for mine. And to-day at least it's only men you'll have to show it to."

His eyes thanked her. So far none but she had with his consent seen that letter. How did she know it was the woman he dreaded?

When the cab pulled up, he got out first.

"I will stay here," she said. "They've only got to send out for me, if I'm wanted."

Bargate stayed with her in the cab.

"Yes," said Lestock, when he had read the letter, "it's enough to get him extradited on. It would convince me that he did it, if I needed convincing. But, if you're expecting a jury to avenge your friend, Gambier ——"

"I'm acting just now merely in self-defence," interrupted Stephen. "If you knew how people have been talking, you wouldn't be surprised that I've been wondering when you are going to arrest me."

Sir Robert laughed—not very successfully, thought Stephen.

"You won't deny that some of your people seriously suspected me," he said.

"One. But I've had my eye on Urquhart the whole time. That woman just lied when she said he hadn't left home. I suspected it, but they believed her at first, because they could find no evidence of his having taken the train at any of the coast stations. Something was said, you may remember, about the man being a great walker. That put an idea into my head, and we're slowly picking up evidence that will fill in both his journeys. We've been working towards him, you see, so as not to scare our bird. Great as this letter is, I'm almost sorry that he's been put on his guard."

"I think you'll find it was worth it," said Stephen.

"To you, I think it is."

Then Sir Robert asked when he could see Miss Beltervane.

"She's waiting in a cab downstairs," said Stephen.

"Lord Bargate's there, looking after her."

"I don't want him," growled Lestock, with memories. "Where does he come in—in the Lemesurier case, I mean?"

"He comes in," said Stephen drily, "as a man who takes not only a political but a personal interest in my reputation."

He went down and brought Clarissa back with him.

When she had told her story, Sir Robert asked her if anything was known of Urquhart's movements after she had escaped his pursuit. When she had answered,

"We can only hope you haven't put him out of our reach, then, Miss Beltervane," he said. And Clarissa thought there was reproach, delicate but distinct, in his voice.

"I hope not," she said with gracious severity. "But even if I had, I shouldn't care very much. Mrs. Beltervane and I were more anxious about the innocent man than the guilty one. And then, you see, I know Major Urquhart killed Mrs. Lemesurier."

"Know it!" exclaimed Lestock.

"Because he told me he did." And Clarissa repeated as many of Urquhart's words as she could remember. Then she added: "I don't know whether a court will take that as evidence."

"Oh, yes, it's evidence," said Lestock.

"Anyhow," she went on, "I'm going to make the whole world believe that I heard him say so. And then, Sir Robert, I don't believe any of your men would have been able to get that letter from him. And privately quite as much as publicly, I think that letter mattered to us more than anything else."

Lestock looked at her with admiration.

"You are perfectly right, Miss Beltervane," he said. "And I won't keep you and Mr. Gambier another minute."

But there were still some minutes for them to spend in that room.

Susan Jermyn, not knowing when her husband might

return to King's Bench Walk, had remained in Stephen's chambers on the pretext of making tea, which Gandy could do far better. Stephen would take it, she knew, as offering matronly cover to Clarissa's return; but her first motive was the wish to see her own husband again at the earliest. For she knew that Stephen this afternoon stood first with George.

Now she had not been alone more than fifteen minutes, when Gandy came into the room. He had in his hand a telegram for his master, and, after some hesitation, he told Susan that, on account of the rumours going about, and owing to what he had read in the papers, he had been much exercised in mind about this Lemesurier murder; and that to-day, since the young lady had come in, after Lord Bargate had so crumpled the coarse folk from Gateside, he had been unable not to pick up, from a word here and a look there, something of the present situation of affairs. So that, a telegram coming, it was — well, it was borne in upon him that this telegram might be from abroad. It was a shame, Gandy thought, that they didn't use a different envelope for foreign messages. You had to use a different form when you sent them, which helped nobody. But if this should be something about that Major Urquhart, it might be useful to Mr. Gambier to have the news before he left Scotland Yard.

"And that, ma'am," he said, "is where he told me to tell the man to drive."

"You do take a long time, Gandy. But you're wise at the end. Scoot off after him in another taxi," said Susan, "and rush into the Home Secretary's office with a telegram that's probably about something quite silly."

"I would, ma'am. But I've no orders about telegrams. And I can't leave you alone in the chambers."

"Oh, yes, you can," said Sukie, with mischief excusable by the number of years she and Gandy had known each other.

"Mr. Gambier, ma'am, is particular," he replied. "I value my place."

"Which all comes to this: I am to play errand-boy for you, Gandy, and take the responsibility. Call me a taxi."

So it was Sukie Jermyn who arrived in the audacious motor-cab which in pulling up nearly ran into Lord Bargate's. There was a short, grunting protest from a constable standing near, which drew Bargate's attention.

He helped her out, and on the pavement she told him her errand. The telegram was sent up to the Assistant Commissioner's room, and Stephen received it just as Lestock thought he had done with his visitors.

Having read it, Stephen handed the telegram to Clarissa. Then,

"I think you ought to read that, Sir Robert," he said.

What Sir Robert Lestock read was this:

"Vincent Urquhart died ten o'clock to-day at Les Nuages. Apoplexy and cerebral hæmorrhage. Eugenia Beltervane. John Ambrose."

Sir Robert shook hands with Stephen last.

"It's through your own craft, Mr. Gambier," he said, "that you must get redress. The police don't pursue the dead."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE DAUGHTER

SILAS BELTERVANE went to bed on the night of Saturday, 5th November, at his usual hour; a man so discontented with himself that he did not sleep until some five or six hours of the Sunday morning had passed under his restlessness, as wave after wave will slide beneath a bobbing cork, bringing it no nearer the shore.

His lonely breakfast was therefore late. He was trying to eat it in his private sitting-room on the first floor of his hotel in Piccadilly, when his eye was caught by a paragraph in the newspaper.

"We regret to report the death of Major Vincent Urquhart, V.C.

"The gallant officer had lived many years in retirement. For the last four years he had resided in the neighbourhood of Mentone, his residence being a modest cottage in the hills north of Roque Brune.

"It seems that Major Urquhart, on Thursday last, was discovered unconscious in one of the lonely mountain paths which abound in the neighbourhood. He was removed promptly to the Château des Nuages, the splendid villa of Silas Beltervane, Esq., late M.P. for the Teddington Division of Middlesex.

"Here, in spite of the greatest care and most skilful medical attention, Major Urquhart died yesterday morning without having recovered consciousness.

"Those of our readers who have followed the evidence in a recent inquest will remember that the late Major Urquhart was at one time the husband of the lady known as Mrs. Lemesurier, whose mysterious death has aroused so much excitement and curiosity."

Poor Silas felt a bitter indignation that fate would still be connecting his house and his family with this abominable affair. What had he done that Clarissa, the child of his youth, and Eugenia, the wife of his maturity, should be mixed up with these two men, and this poor, tarnished woman?

Being always uncomfortable when he had not a course of action clearly marked out, and hating procrastination so much that in private matters his danger was precipitancy, he resolved boldly to make an end of these things.

Thinking himself alone, he brought his fist savagely down on *The Observer*.

"There shall be no more of it, by God!" he said aloud. But a voice behind him asked:

"No more of what, father dear?"

And he turned to see Clarissa in the doorway.

She came to him, putting her arms round his neck and kissing him. Then she sat beside him. And from the spirit in her eyes and the touch of her lips on his cheek, he knew there was joy in his daughter beyond any that he or Eugenia, or even Stephen Gambier, while they were all together, had been able to give her.

"I'll have some of your coffee," she said. "No, we won't ring for a cup — I'll have the slop-basin."

She took off her hat and fur stole, laying them with her muff on the sofa. She poured milk and coffee into the little bowl, leaned her elbows on the table, and drank, holding the bowl in both hands.

"I love drinking like a kitchen-maid," she said. "Now I'll tell you all about me, when you have told me what, by God, there shall be no more of."

She looked very beautiful, eyeing him over her coffee with a mischievous provocation quite new in her, he thought. But her unusual loveliness strengthened his purpose, and he tried to harden his heart.

"This," he said; and showed her the passage in the newspaper.

"I thought so. You thumped the paper so hard, as well as swearing! But even now I don't know what you mean. If he's dead, how can there be more of it?"

"I mean, Clarissa, that I am going to prevent any further association of my name and my family with this disgraceful affair. An unmentionable woman, a dissolute man, and a religious maniac, none of whom really has anything to do with us!"

"Two of the people you seem to be speaking of," said Clarissa, "are dead."

"And the one that is worst for me, because he is worst for you, my child," said Silas, "is alive."

"Do you mean Mr. Gambier?" asked Clarissa. She had grown used very quickly, in these twenty-four hours, to calling and thinking of her lover as "Stephen." But she could not use that name to one wishing him dead.

Silas nodded.

"Mr. Gambier," said Clarissa, softly and without anger, "is more to me than anyone else."

"Is that why you are in town?" asked her father, half rising.

"That is why I am in town," answered Clarissa, leaning back in her chair.

"You came to tell him of Urquhart's death?"

"Major Urquhart died yesterday morning. I left on Thursday."

"You read of his death in the paper, then?"

"No," said Clarissa. "Eugenia telegraphed yesterday afternoon."

"Where have you been? Why didn't you come to me before?"

"I stayed Friday and Saturday nights at Green's Hotel in Dover Street—the place you always send Eugenia and me to, if we're alone. My maid is with me. I didn't come to see you before, because I should have had to tell you what I was about. And that would only have worried you."

"Why d'you come now, then?"

"Because I've done what I came for, and I like being with you, when it can't do any harm."

Silas looked at her, feeling helpless.

"Shall I tell you what's been happening?" asked Clarissa sweetly.

"Yes. But understand first of all," he replied, with a last snatch at the authority which had slipped through his fingers, "that I positively forbid you any communication with this man Gambier."

"I understand," said Clarissa.

"And you don't mind?" asked Silas, smiling as if he almost believed she was going to save him further anxiety.

"Not a bit, dear," she answered, laughing; "because, you see, it doesn't make any difference. Ah, daddy!" she cried, seeing his face cloud, "don't go and think I wouldn't rather have you in the right than in the wrong. It's only that I'm so sure you'll be on the right side soon, that I'm not going to let it worry me much."

He seemed to shudder inwardly; then,

"So Eugenia telegraphed to you that this Urquhart had died in my house?" he asked.

"She telegraphed to Mr. Gambier," said Clarissa.

"And you were with him?"

"Yes. Now, listen. I'm going to tell you all I can. For your sake, father, I'm sorry that Major Urquhart is dead. In a sort of way, I caused his death; but I'm not sorry for that." And she went on to tell him the story of the last Wednesday and Thursday. Only two things did she keep from him. She told him of the letter and of the devices by which she had stolen it; but she said nothing of the dead man's confession. She told him of her flight and Urquhart's pursuit, and of her suspicion that his rage and his tremendous effort to catch her might have overcome him; of her journey to bring to Stephen the letter which had been written to him by the woman that was dead, and stolen, it appeared, by the murderer.

Even when Silas interrupted her to ask if she herself had read this letter, she answered that she had. But when he asked her what the letter contained, and how, beyond Urquhart's possession of it, it bore upon the case,

"I'm sorry," she replied, "but I don't think I'm at liberty to tell you that. It was shown me in confidence. If you had remained friends with Mr. Gambier——"

"I suppose," said Silas, "that he has told you of the interview we had on Friday night."

"He hasn't even mentioned it. He has hardly spoken of you, except to say he'd rather I let you know I was in town," replied Clarissa.

"But you seemed to know we had quarrelled."

"Lord Bargate told me a good many things," said Clarissa. "I met him at lunch at Mr. Gambier's yesterday. And you ought to have been there with us, and you would have been, if you hadn't gone and filled your mind with absurd ideas. They were all so nice about me and what I'd done."

"The assumption is, I take it, that the possession of this letter proves Urquhart killed the woman. Now I think it only proves that he went to her house," said Silas. "It occurs to me that the very fact of his preserving so incriminating a letter goes to show that, being innocent, it never crossed his mind that anyone could suspect him."

Clarissa reflected a moment.

"I believe, father," she said at last, "that he didn't care much whether they found him out or not. But he kept the letter for the same reason that you want to know what was in it."

"What's that?" asked Silas sharply.

"He either hoped or feared—I'm not sure which, in his case, but in yours it was hoping—hoped or feared to find proof in that letter that she had been wicked."

Silas blushed. He hated women to understand things which he found them in these days often understanding better than he. But he longed to understand his daughter.

"Wicked?" he echoed untruthfully.

"I mean," she replied, her lips very pale, "proof that she had been wicked with Stephen."

"I wonder," said her father, "that you can speak of it, my dear."

"It is your thought, father," she replied, "which you force me to express for you. And such a thought, once in my head, is far more my business than anyone else's."

"Well," he asked, "what do you think?"

"I think," she answered,— "no, I just know—that if I had any opinion about a sacred matter like that, no one on earth but my husband should ever know what it was. And I know something more, father: it is because some queer twist in you made you imagine that there was—was a *liaison* between that poor dead lady and my Mr. Gambier, that you hoped to discover that he had killed her. And that was horrid of you; because, if it is anyhow wicked to kill, how much wickeder it is to kill what has loved and trusted you!"

His daughter, even while she shocked every prejudice in him, was increasing every moment his reluctant admiration.

"You say I *wished* to find a murderer?"

"In your secret heart—yes; because you would want to take me away from a man, even if I loved him, once you knew he was not as girls must be. And you knew that I would never let you or anyone else change my mind for me on account of a thing like that, whatever I might do of myself. But the other thing—oh! I don't mean you *thought* it all. But you were so sure, in your dear primness, that he was bad for me, that you couldn't help feeling that the greatest badness would be most useful."

Silas had trouble in meeting her eyes; and after a while turned his aside.

"Now, dear," she went on, "let's understand each other. I'm grown up, you see. I've always liked doing what you have bidden me do, and it has often saved the trouble of making up a careless mind. But it's wicked to obey when

one knows better. It isn't only because I love and admire him beyond words that I won't let you separate us. It isn't only because it isn't in me to desert a friend in trouble. It is both these things, but it is most of all because it would be wicked, when I know what he is. A deep, worldly, black sort of wickedness — a calculating wickedness — the kind that damns ever so much worse than people's passionate and generous sins. If you could tell me all sorts of sins Stephen had done — and you can't tell me one — but if you could, it wouldn't make any difference. It's what he is that matters. I know what he is, and so I am his when he wants me, and as long as he wants me."

She took up the bowl and finished her coffee.

"I'm not going back to *Les Nuages* now," she resumed. "I think *Eugenia* won't mind coming home. Till she does, I want to stay with you here. But before I come, you must promise that this subject is to be let alone between us, unless I reopen it, and that I am to be, until I am married, my own mistress."

He sat in silence a long time, pondering. That he was not angry she knew by his eyes when they dwelt on her. But what he was thinking she did not know.

"Your mother," he said at last, "was like you. Her people — well, they thought much of their family. They told her she must not marry a linen-draper. She was very like you, *Clarissa*."

He went to the writing-table and wrote a letter. Having enveloped and sealed it, he gave it to his daughter.

"I want you to keep that, *Clarissa*, till I tell you to open and read it." When she had promised, "You and I," he said, "will go to *Charles Street* to-morrow or Tuesday. Then I can leave you there while I run out to fetch *Eugenia* home."

When she left him in the afternoon, she told him it was to meet *Stephen Gambier* at *Mrs. Jermyn's*.

He made no comment, but *Clarissa* felt the changed mind in him, which, for some reason, he would not acknowledge in words.

CHAPTER XXX

WITNESS FOR THE PLAINTIFF

A WEEK later they were settled in the house in Charles Street. And it was from Silas himself that Clarissa heard, the day after his return to London with Eugenia, that a writ had been served on him for libel; that heavy damages were claimed, and that the plaintiff was Stephen Gambier. But not even with Eugenia would Silas discuss the matter.

Clarissa, indeed, attempted no discussion; merely thanking him for telling her, and assuring him that this was the first she heard of it, though she had always thought, since the death of Major Urquhart, that the action would have to be brought. Silas nodded gravely, and spoke of other things.

Eugenia was less easily content. She wept for very vexation when she found it useless to attack Silas, and went to Clarissa for comfort.

"It's disgusting," she declared. "Think what we owe to him! To have said anything about him that wasn't good seems awful."

Clarissa nodded. "But father," she said, "hasn't had our opportunities of knowing Stephen's goodness."

On this Eugenia wept again.

"I'll tell Silas what a fool I was. I'll do anything. It's all hateful," she sobbed.

"Don't be silly, dear," said Clarissa. "Would father like him better for that? Besides, it would tell him what is going to be my secret always, with only you and Stephen in it. Father is never to know I haven't loved Stephen all the while; because, dear, I do so love him now that I

won't be robbed of a day of him, even backwards. Why, Eugenia, darling, if you hadn't been so absurd that time," she continued, with her arm round the other woman's neck, and their faces cheek to cheek, "I should never have got to know him. And — I'm not certain — perhaps I should have loved him in the end as much as I do now — but I'm sure it would have taken ever so much longer for me to find out how much, if there hadn't been this dreadful injustice. Besides, don't you see that if you persuaded father to see it all as you do, he could at best publish an apology. But if they actually have it all out in court, the whole world will know the truth and be obliged to believe it."

"Oh!" said Eugenia, a new thought striking her. "But then, perhaps that's why ——"

Clarissa smiled.

"If it were, you know," she replied, "of course he wouldn't say so even to you or me — not now. So we've just got to wait."

But even Clarissa's philosophy tottered when, a few days later, a letter from Stephen told her that the action could hardly come on before the end of April. It was then Clarissa who ran for sympathy to Eugenia.

"Don't you think it's just wicked?" she asked, "to keep us waiting five months?"

"That's not so very long, as engagements go," replied Eugenia.

"Don't be absurd," said Clarissa. "It isn't marrying that I'm worried about. Of course almost everybody knows we're engaged. But hardly anyone speaks of it, and that makes me furious. It shows they think it's an awkward subject. And it's rather torturing, Eugenia: because I can't tell whether they're keeping off the subject only because they know he doesn't come here, and think father's against it; or whether there is really a widespread belief that he did do it."

And Clarissa shuddered with mixed anger and horror.

Eugenia mentioned one or two people of position who, under the breath, had spoken of the matter.

"I think," she said in conclusion, "that there has been a kind of attraction in the idea that a murder *might* have been committed by a person so well known and distinguished. But that horrid man dying has somehow destroyed their interest, except so far as you are concerned. Your owning to the engagement makes them think we know something. Of course I only tell them that you and I just *know* he didn't."

But for Clarissa those months of waiting were heavy in prospect.

"The thought that there are people in the world thinking bad things of him," she said, "makes me quite different from what I ever was before. I want to go and shout at them that they are fools. I'm going to see him."

As she had reason to expect, she found him in Susan Jermyn's drawing-room.

"Stephen," she said, when Sukie had left them alone together, "I want to show them what one person at least thinks of you. It isn't much I can do, but, as I told Eugenia, I want to shout at people about you. And this is the only way of shouting I can think of: please make all the arrangements and marry me as soon as ever you can."

Her face flaming with the colour of her courage, and their lids all but hiding a light such as he had not seen in her eyes before, Clarissa was a gift hard to refuse. She let him take her in his arms with a passion he had never until now ventured to display.

"I did not know," he said after a while, "that you loved me like this."

"Nor did I," she answered simply. "You see, I didn't know I could. It's strange, coming to find your whole life lies in a thing that six weeks ago you hardly believed in. Well," she said, since he did not speak, "aren't you going to do it? I've made you an offer, and you say neither yes nor no."

"No is hard to say," said Stephen.

"Don't say it," said the girl.

"I do say it, though. I will never marry you, dear,"

he answered, "while there's a rag of suspicion left sticking to me. After the case, there won't be."

But Clarissa persisted that she cared for no opinions, but only for displaying her own of Stephen Gambier.

"My dear," he said at last, "in my action against your father, you will be my best witness. To make you my wife now wouldn't improve your effect on a jury."

"I never thought of that," cried the girl. "I'll be just what's most useful, then. But I did want to do something."

"You have done everything already. And to-day," said Stephen, "you have done a thing I didn't think anybody could do — made me love you twice as much as I did yesterday."

The time, somehow or other, did go by. For Clarissa there were alternations of the shires, Mayfair, Paris, and the country once more; hurried meetings and here and there a long interview with her lover.

There came a proud day when she was subpoenaed as a witness in Stephen's suit against her father; then more days like sawdust in the mouth.

Hope grew, however, with the decreasing days, till at last there stood but one between her and the opening of the case — the day which might also see, she was told, the close of it.

They were in town, and father and daughter had dined at home and alone. It was April, and the weather like May as it should be. Eugenia was out in pleasant company for dinner, theatre and supper. Clarissa, their conflict notwithstanding, felt no *gêne* with her father. She talked well and amusingly through dinner, and went afterwards with him to the room called his study.

A soft air drifted in through open windows, and something stirred her to expansion.

"Father," she began, "there's a thing I want to tell you."

"Tell away," answered Silas good-humouredly.

"Some time ago — when I first knew how long this horrid business was going to drag on," said Clarissa, "I went to see Mr. Gambier."

"I know, my dear, that you've been to see him whenever you could. At that Mrs. Jermyn's, isn't it? You cannot have seen him much oftener than you've told me you've seen him."

"Not *much* oftener," said Clarissa. "But I'm going to tell you what I did — what I said, that day. I told him he'd got to marry me at once — so that I at least might show what I believed — what I knew."

Then, catching sight of her father's face, she laughed.

"Oh, no, dear!" she cried. "I'm not secretly married. That wouldn't have satisfied me at all. You see, he wouldn't marry me, though I do really believe he'd have liked to do what I asked him. But he said he never would while there was a rag of suspicion left. I wanted you to know."

Silas nodded.

"I suppose," he said, "that you will be called for the plaintiff."

"Yes," said Clarissa.

"To-day's Saturday. Well, if they get through in one day," Silas continued, "we'll talk about it on Tuesday. Meantime, we'll love each other as much as we can, daughter."

"I can't help doing that, heaps and heaps," she replied, an arm round his neck; "so much, that it's a horrid pain, when you don't love what I love."

"We'll talk about that too," said Silas.

"On Tuesday?" asked Clarissa.

"It might be Monday night," said Silas.

Louis Lothrop, K.C., for the plaintiff, opened his case on the Monday so convincingly that there seemed little prospect of its running into a second day. Clarissa, when she had heard him, regarded the action no longer as the hearing of a claim for heavy damages, but as a great *réclame* of Stephen Gambier's goodness and innocence.

Having briefly stated the circumstances in which Silas Beltervane's letter had been written to Lord Bargate, he went back to the Urquhart divorce, promising to bring evi-

dence of the fear with which the discarded wife had for years regarded her late husband. The plaintiff himself and Mrs. Lemesurier's solicitor would establish so much. He then gave a graceful and touching account of the friendship between the plaintiff and the murdered woman. After reading some portions of the evidence given before the Coroner, he showed how it was possible—was, indeed, a fact that a certain amount of suspicion had grown up about his client, and had undoubtedly been expressed by irresponsible persons.

He next explained how two police officers had come to the belief that a letter had been written by Mrs. Lemesurier shortly before her death; further, how, in reading the reports of the inquest, the daughter of the defendant in this action had come to the opinion that Vincent Urquhart was the actual murderer; how this gallant young lady, betrothed to the plaintiff, had resolved to get from Vincent Urquhart a letter which she knew he had had in his possession since the time of the murder. He told at length how this had been accomplished; explaining that the handwriting would be sworn to as Mrs. Lemesurier's by many witnesses; that a handwriting expert would give his opinion that it was probably written with the very pen found on the floor of her drawing-room and that the possession of the letter by Urquhart, since it had not been through the post, proved that Urquhart himself must have taken it from the room from where its writer died.

In the letter itself there was evidence that Mrs. Lemesurier was not at variance with Mr. Stephen Gambier, and that Mr. Stephen Gambier was not aware, when she wrote, that the writer had left him money; for the letter mentioned her will as news; and the only persons aware of the will and its purport, in the office of Messrs. Jerome and Pettifer, would swear that they had kept the secret. The letter would also prove the high esteem in which the late Mrs. Lemesurier held the plaintiff, giving reasons extremely unselfish for her refusal some years ago of the plaintiff's offer of marriage, and expressing her delight in the happiness which

she was sure awaited him in the alliance which had been arranged between him and the defendant's daughter.

Counsel then proceeded to the confession, or admission of the murder, made to Miss Beltervane by the late Major Urquhart during the interview at the end of which she had so ingeniously gained possession of the letter described.

Here there ensued a brief reference to the evidence which would be given by two Scotland Yard detectives, who had traced the late Major Urquhart's movements between the 19th and the 24th of October last.

So, counsel continued, not only would the guilt of this crime be fixed upon another man, but also the utter absence of motive for its commission by even the worst of men in the plaintiff's position would be established.

The late Major Urquhart had died of cerebral hæmorrhage, resulting from his desperate exertions to overtake Miss Beltervane, when she had fled from him with the letter in her possession. This death had forced upon plaintiff the necessity of bringing the present action as the only means of publishing to the world facts which should have come to light in a trial for murder.

It was unfortunate that plaintiff should have been obliged to bring his suit against a gentleman for whom he had much respect and entertained feelings of the greatest kindness.

Clarissa had been afraid that the letter which had so profoundly touched her would be read aloud in court; she knew that it must eventually be so read, as part of the evidence; but she was for the moment immensely relieved by what she thought counsel's good taste in postponing the publication of words and feelings so intimate.

During the examination of the earlier witnesses she felt a certain weariness coming over her. The establishment of the libel, the slow and elaborate proofs of the statements made in Lothrop's exposition of the claim, seemed to her mere tedious repetition. Why could they not take it all for granted, so that she might the sooner get her father and Stephen together and see them shake hands?

And then she heard her name called, and found herself, after a period in which she was almost unconscious of what she did, in the witness-box.

It seemed as if the least error or uncertainty of hers might spoil everything. When she answered the first question, her own voice seemed to come from a great distance.

"It's the trial of a dead man for murder," whispered Hidges to Stephen.

When she came to full consciousness of herself, Clarissa was giving her account of that last meeting with Vincent Urquhart.

When Hidges spoke to Stephen, she was telling how, to distract the man from her design upon the letter, she had accused him directly of the crime, and of how he had received the accusation.

". . . and he said he had killed her—'I slew her,' he said, as if it were a small thing to kill."

"That word *slew* would have hanged him," whispered Hidges.

And the tale went on, Clarissa narrating or answering questions with a clarity and dignity of which she alone was unaware.

She was asked what had made her suspect Urquhart of the murder.

"I remembered his behaviour when I made that unhappy remark about the picture," she replied, referring to the earlier part of her evidence. "I knew that the peasant woman had lied to the French police about his being at home all those days between the 19th and the 24th; I knew the police thought there was a letter; and I saw him with a letter that had a clean penny stamp on it. So I thought I ought to get hold of it for Mr. Gambier's sake."

The letter was put into her hand. She looked at it, holding it secretly and tight while she glanced at its words, as if afraid the world should trespass on sacred ground; and she swore to it as the letter she had rescued.

Lothrop asked if she had read it.

"In London," she replied, "by Mr. Gambier's request."

She was asked further, why did she suppose Mr. Gambier wished her to read this letter.

She replied with simplicity:

"Because we are going to be married."

And Eugenia's sharp eyes, fixed on the jury, told her that this little answer was like a bullet which pierces twelve men in a row.

"You have told the jury," said Lothrop, "that when the late Major Urquhart said: 'I slew her,' he seemed to think lightly of killing."

"Yes," replied Clarissa.

"Did he add any words which might account for that lightness?"

"'I slew her because—because she was not clean,' he said—and that, being dead, she would sin no more. He afterwards said that he was always reading and re-reading the letter to find some—some indication of that sin, and had not found it."

There was a fraction of a second's silence; then the girl, with her eyes on the judge, said:

"I wish they'd ask me what *I* think of the letter."

None asked her, but none seemed to forbid, so she risked a public snubbing.

"It is a beautiful and a sad letter," she said. "There is nothing in it like that. I think Major Urquhart had really loved the lady, and had brooded on his divorce till he was quite mad."

She was permitted to stand down, and as she regained her seat, she had a sense of being clothed with nothing but blushes, and carried in her heart a sickening apprehension that now at last that harsh voice of the incongenial Lothrop was going to rasp out the repressed passion and unrestrained tenderness of the letter she had read on that dull morning months ago, the first time she had been in Stephen's study. She hated even worse than Louis Lothrop's voice the vision of its words printed "on grey paper with blunt type," in *The Farthing Flashlight*.

Suddenly she thought: was not this Lothrop the man

whom Stephen had told her he had till quite lately disliked; the man he had known for years — the man that had snubbed him repeatedly when he was a junior — the man who had been awkwardly, painfully cordial on the morning when Stephen had first learned that men could speak ill of him? Then Lothrop, if this were the man, whatever his raucousness, might read even Clarissa Beltervane's love-letters aloud to the *canaille* of the universe, if need were; for this morning and this afternoon had taught her a little more about men.

Very soon counsel for the defence was saying something. And when Clarissa understood what he was saying, she determined that, when she was married, Lothrop should be the first man invited to dinner — a very small dinner, after which she would talk to him.

For counsel for the defence was telling the judge that the defence was prepared to submit to judgment; and somebody near told her that this meant that the case would stop there. And she guessed that Lothrop had worked all the time to keep the letter from being read aloud in court.

And now counsel for the defence was saying that there was no agreement as to damages, which the defence wished left to the jury.

Then Lord Bargate, whom she had forgotten since he gave evidence of the receipt of the libellous letter, was on one side of her and Eugenia on the other, guiding her across Fleet Street.

Just when she felt so "swimmy" that things looked dark and blotchy, she heard Bargate say:

"Better take her to Gambier's rooms."

Eugenia said something, and Clarissa thought vaguely how funny it was, because she didn't think Lord Bargate and Eugenia had ever met before. And then she heard, though she couldn't at the time understand one bit what it was all about, that Lord Bargate thought somebody's evidence had settled the case at once. "Because, my dear Mrs. Beltervane, they couldn't see her and hear her, and

not know that every word was clean silver, and every thought pure gold."

Flagged courts, archways, and, once or twice, inquisitive faces were all she knew thereafter, until she found herself waking from some sleepy stupidity in — yes, it was — in Stephen's little study, with dear Sukie Jermyn and dearer Eugenia fussing over her foolishly.

They brought her tea and things. But it was only when Stephen came, and they left her with him, that she could tell why she had nearly — not quite, she insisted — nearly fainted: she had so earnestly — so bitterly against hope — desired that *the* letter — her letter that she had stolen — should not be given to the common ear and the vulgar eye.

"I couldn't help it, Stephen. I had been screwing myself up to bear it — for you — for me. Yet I felt I ought to protect her, and I couldn't. When I heard that after all it was not going to be read out, the relief was so enormous that it had an awfully queer effect on me."

For a while the man could not speak.

"Beloved," he said at last, "you threw your arms — your wings — right round her. When you gave your own, unasked opinion of her letter, you did a thing I don't believe any other woman would have done."

"I don't think you know much about us, dear," said Clarissa.

"In their hearts, most women would have been blaming, or judging," he persisted. "For, after all, you did know — I did tell you."

"I was so proud of being told as you told me — so sorry for you — and so much sorrier for her! Dear," said Clarissa, leaning forward from her deep chair and touching him with her fingers, — "dear, I'm not your judge. I'm your lover — your mother — your advocate. And I'm going to be your wife."

By her own heart she knew why he could not answer. Yet she seemed to wait for the words that would not come.

"What you had told me, was mine," she went on at

last. "I'm the only one, am I not, that can share it? Those others — the cruel, inquisitive faces in the court, and the great beast outside — they haven't any right to know. I think I hated the whole world, Stephen, when I thought it was going to gloat over her words written for you."

In that moment it seemed to Stephen Gambier that his entire being was devotion; there were no words in him at all. So a great silence came between them, in which they were closer than speech can join.

It was broken by the opening of a distant door, and the sound of voices, loud and soft: Eugenia's, Sukie's, George Jermyn's, Bargate's, and the harsh notes of the great Lothrop made a tangle of sound from which only four words came out distinct.

"Damages five thousand pounds!"

That was Bargate's voice.

"Stay here," said Stephen. "I must go to them. I'll send you Sukie, or Mrs. Beltervane."

But Clarissa rose.

"I'm coming too," she said. "I'm all right now. And I want to see Mr. Lothrop."

Five minutes later Clarissa came to the opinion that she herself was the cause of Lothrop's presence in Stephen's chambers. It gave her a curious sense of triumph.

In the midst of tea, whiskies-and-sodas, and unrestrained, high-pitched talk, Gandy brought in a card; and Clarissa, though Stephen kept it in his fingers as he left the room, knew that his latest visitor was her father.

Stephen found to-day a whiter tone in the harmonious greyness. Something in the perturbed face recalled the calm Clarissa's as he had seen her when she first stood in the witness-box, and his heart warmed to the means of his vindication.

"I am sorry, sir," he said, "that there has been any difference between us."

Silas took the hand offered to him.

"Is Clarissa here?" he asked.

Stephen rang the bell.

"Yes. There's a crowd of them in the other room," he replied. "Shall we join them?"

"Clarissa first," said Silas.

Gandy entered and was sent with a message.

When she came, Silas asked if she had the letter which was not to be opened till he gave her leave. She went to the couch where she had dropped her little hand-bag with a feather boa and a parasol.

"I thought it would be to-day," she said, opening the letter. When she had read it, she gave it to Stephen.

This is what he read:

"6th Nov., 19—.

"DEAR CLARISSA,— You have convinced me that in my conversation with Mr. Gambier on Friday night last, and in my letter written to Lord Bargate an hour later, I did Mr. Gambier wrong. There is only one consideration which induces me to postpone my apology to him and to you. By doing so I afford him the opportunity of a more public vindication than any retraction would give. I hope he will take it.

"Your father,

"SILAS BELTERVANE."

"Now," said Silas, as Stephen looked up from reading, "I hope you will forgive me, Gambier."

"I can't see that there is anything to forgive," objected Stephen.

"What I said and what I wrote was genuine. I was angry and unreasonable. The only reparation I could make was to force my lawyers to fight the case till at least the essential part of your evidence had been given to the court. Until I consented this afternoon to submit to judgment, they thought I was the most wrong-headed man in the world."

"You have done me a great service, sir," said Stephen. "That is all I shall remember."

"I sent you this afternoon a peace-offering. Gandy is

unpacking it in his quarters, I believe. May I tell him to have it brought in here, while we are in the other room? I want you and my girl to see it first, and afterwards perhaps you will let me see it. For, though I believe you will admire and prize the thing, I have refrained from even looking at it until it should be in your possession."

In the larger room the defendant was received with so much cordiality by the plaintiff's friends that he was soon convinced that none of them, except George Jermyn, believed his animosity against Stephen had ever been sincere. This attitude, Clarissa afterwards learned from Eugenia, was the result of some ingenious comments on the case which had fallen from Louis Lothrop while she had been in the study with Stephen and Silas.

Even then she guessed it was Lothrop who had so eased her father's repentance, and was soon receiving his congratulations with all the grace and charm she could have bestowed on an old friend.

While Silas was inviting the whole roomful to join him at the Savoy for dinner, and meeting no refusal, a telegram was brought to Stephen.

He read it and passed it to Bargate, and Bargate read it aloud.

"I congratulate you. Am applying for the Hundreds.—FRANCIS MILROY."

"Milroy's a better friend than minister," said Bargate. "The Government Whips won't be pleased."

"I'm not so sure," said Silas Beltervane. "When Gambier is elected, they'll be able to say it was mere personal popularity enhanced by the injustice he has suffered. They know they'd lose the seat anyhow."

The Jermyns, Bargate and Lothrop were gone at last, leaving only the three Beltervanes, when Gandy announced that he had carried out the directions given him by Silas.

A little curious as to what she was to see there, Clarissa went with Stephen to his study.

The one window of the room looked westward down

Crown Buildings Court. The sun, though not set, had dropped behind the roofs beyond Middle Temple Lane, and the sky above them was flushed with a glow increasing in warmth and colour every moment.

Leaning against the wall opposite the window, raised on two chairs, was the Sergeantson portrait of Miriam Lemesurier.

Technically the light was not the best for the painting. But at first sight the vivid face and the cream-white shoulders seemed to gather both mystery and life from the glory of the sunset.

Clarissa made a soft exclamation: she could almost believe she had seen the bosom rise to the breath.

After a while, she left Stephen with the picture and fetched her father.

Silas Beltervane gazed for a long time at the portrait of the woman with whom his words and his thought had dealt hardly.

And then at last,

"That makes all the difference," he said,—“all the difference.”

THE END

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